

Harry Potter and the Darkness Within.

Chapter 1 – Learning.

Harry lowered his wand with a smile. He had finally got it right, the spell he had been practicing for more than a week. Soon Tom Riddle would be no more. The smile dropped momentarily as he magically dug a hole and buried the rabbit he had killed with the spell before turning reluctantly back towards the castle.

It was getting late and the shadows were lengthening as he walked through the Forbidden Forest towards the castle. It was May, the end of Harry's sixth year and in little more than a week he would be heading back for another long, arduous summer with the Dursleys.

Voldemort had once again made his yearly appearance, luring Harry to Hogsmeade a month ago after Theodore Nott and Pansy Parkinson kidnapped Ron and sent Harry a letter. The lessons from the previous year were forgotten as Harry immediately headed for the local village, not realising that most of the DA were following him.

Ron had been rescued, Voldemort had once again been bettered, but several members had been injured and Seamus and Dean had both died.

Harry had felt so guilty he hadn't spoken for a week. He couldn't believe he had done it again. His Gryffindor idiocy had once again taken another innocent's life and as the year before Harry swore it wouldn't happen again.

The only difference was this year he actually did something about it. He spent every night in the restricted section of the Library. He stopped going to classes, instead practicing in the Room of Requirement or the Forbidden Forest when he wanted space. He taught himself Occlumency, only knowing that he had succeeded when Snape caught him in the Library a week later.

Flashback

'Bloody hell,' Harry swore, lifting his wand slightly to enable him to read the tiny script on the ancient tome before him. He was curled up

in a corner of the restricted section surrounded by books, the light from his wand shielded by a handy spell he had learnt the second night. 'How on earth can you send both spells at once? You can't say them at the same time.' He muttered.

'I think you'll find, Potter, you are supposed to think them, not say them.' Drawled a silky voice from in front of him.

Harry started, dropping his wand leaping to his feet, the tome landing on the floor with a thud. 'Professor Snape.' Harry breathed. Damn, now he was in for it.

'Mr Potter.' The potions master sneered. 'Might I enquire as to why you are not tucked up safely in your tower with the rest of your dim-witted friends? Is this another of the little jaunts required to keep your reputation intact, or is there a purpose for your sitting on a cold stone floor in the middle of the night, defiling expensive books by dropping them on the floor?'

Harry gaped, his mouth opening and closing several times. 'P..professor Snape.' Harry stammered and Snape arched one elegant black eyebrow.

'Really, Potter, surely you can come up with a better response than that.' The older man scoffed. 'Due to your habitual absence over these last weeks I find myself almost, dare I say it, missing your defiant glare and ready answer.'

Harry bowed his head, his hands wringing in front of him. 'I'm sorry, Sir.' He said softly. 'I've been busy.'

'And what, exactly, Mr Potter, is more important than your education?' The raised eyebrow remained.

Harry finally raised his head and stared back, his expression blank. 'My life.' He whispered. 'and the lives of those I love.'

Both of Snape's eyebrows shot skywards as he stared down at the sixteen year old in front of him. This wasn't the same boy of a year ago or even a month ago. 'I see that you've finally realized the futility

of relying on your Gryffindor idiocy to save everyone.' He gestured to the Dark Arts books scattered at Harry's feet.

Harry glanced down before blushing brightly. 'Yes, Sir. No one will die for me again.' He said firmly and with such conviction that Snape almost took a step backwards. He could feel the self hate and loathing rolling off the boy in waves.

'Go to bed, Potter.' His said curtly.

'Sir?' Harry gave him a quizzical look.

'Would you feel better if I gave you detention Mr Potter?' Snape asked sarcastically.

Harry snorted. 'Probably.' He muttered.

'From what I've heard it would be a moot point as you wouldn't turn up anyway.'

Harry gave a non committal sound before reply. 'I would turn up for yours Sir.'

Now it was Snape's turn to look curious. 'And why would that be Mr Potter. You don't turn up for any other detentions. You don't turn up for normal classes to be told you even have detention. Your classes are important.'

Harry rolled his eyes. 'And how, Professor, is learning to turn a table lamp into a turtle supposed to help me defeat Tom Riddle anyway. I suppose if the turtle were big enough I could squash him to death.' He added with a smirk, eyes shining as he saw the Professor's mouth twitch. 'Of course, I suppose I could try several cheering charms, or maybe tickling charms. He might split himself laughing. The again, I'm sure I could practically bore him to death reciting goblin rebellions.'

Snape actually let out a snort, startling Harry once again. 'I do see your point, Mr Potter.' He drawled before looking down at Harry shrewdly. 'I have a proposition for you, Mr Potter.'

'A proposition, Sir?' Harry asked tentatively.

'I trust you know where my office is?' Harry nodded. 'I'll expect you to be there at eight sharp tomorrow night.'

Harry looked thoughtfully at the man in front of him. His mind was racing, he had thought he was done for at the beginning of the conversation, instead the potions master had talked civilly to him, well, civilly for Snape anyway, and inviting him to his office the following night, no loss of points or even a detention. Harry nodded in acquiescence and Snape turned on his heel and stalked away.

'Good night Mr Potter.' He called over his shoulder and Harry let out the breath he had been holding, just a moment too soon. 'Oh, and ten points from Gryffindor for being out after curfew.' Came floating back at him.

'Bollocks.' Harry swore, hearing the other man snort softly before the library door closed.

End Flashback.

The next evening had been the beginning of a rather odd...partnership. Three evenings a week Harry would meet Snape in the Room of Requirement and let the potions master throw some of the nastiest and most vile spells in his arsenal at him as Harry tried his best to counter them. They worked on Animagus transformation before slinking down to the Forbidden Forest so that Harry could learn to apparate. The only payment Snape required for all this extra tuition was that Harry return to his classes, although he had sneered and added that being able to curse Harry with almost anything had really been payment in itself. Harry had just smirked and ducked.

Snape had told Harry that Dumbledore and the Order were getting suspicious, hence the need to return to classes. He said Dumbledore was worried that Harry was leaning towards the dark. That with his history at the Dursleys, he would take the same path as Voldemort and join the Dark Lord. Harry had had a good laugh at that but Snape had not been amused.

‘Potter.’ Harry was startled out of his reverie by the potions master’s growl. He hadn’t even realized he had just stepped into the castle.

‘Sir?’ Harry asked hesitantly as Snape bundled him into the room just inside the entrance hall.

‘You have to get out of here. Now.’ Snape told him, handing him a small bag.

‘What? What are you talking about?’

‘Longbottom’s dead. They are saying it was you. The great hall is full of Aurors.’

‘WHAT?’ Harry bellowed, Snape instantly clapping his hand over Harry’s mouth.

‘Shut up, Potter and listen.’ He hissed. ‘There were witnesses, they all said it was you. They are here to arrest you. If you don’t go now, you will be in Azkaban for the rest of your life.’

‘But I didn’t do it.’ Harry insisted. ‘I didn’t do anything.’

Snape rolled his eyes. ‘I know this, you know this. But I can promise you Potter, that every single person in that hall thinks you are guilty as hell.’

Harry’s expression blanked. ‘There must be a mistake. They’ll sort it out.’ He said confidently, moving around the potions master and grasping the door handle.

‘Potter.’ Snape growled, grabbing his arm. ‘For once in your life, quash that Gryffindor in you and let the Slytherin rear it’s head. The only chance you have is to run until we can find the truth.’

Harry shook his head. ‘No Professor. I’ve never run before and I’m not going to start now.’ He finished, opening the door and crossing swiftly towards the great hall.

‘For Merlin’s sake.’ Snape groaned as Harry disappeared through the doors.

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Harry felt the door smack into his back as it closed behind him. It seemed as if the entire hall had been awaiting his return and were all glaring hatefully at him. The group of ten Aurors moved towards him as Dumbledore and McGonagall strode down from the head table. Harry looked into the normally blue eyes seeing only ice and it was only then that he realized why Snape had been so worried. There would be no investigation, no chance of freedom. He had been tried and found guilty already in the eyes of those that counted.

‘Mr Potter,’ Dumbledore said coldly as the Aurors roughly bound Harry’s arms. ‘I am severely disappointed in you.’

‘Professor, what...’ Harry trailed off, seeing nothing but anger and hate in the eyes of those around him. He was numb as the Aurors explained what he was being arrested for, it was a distant sound that barely reached his level on consciousness. The only thing that did register as they half dragged, half carried him from the hall was the pained look that flickered in the eyes of the potions master as he stood watching from the edge of the hall and the same look that he caught in brown eyes that were wide with horror.

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The screaming in his head receded as the Dementors moved away and Harry pulled himself up so he was leaning against the wall once more. Almost four years had passed since he had been thrown into this hell hole and Harry knew it was only the beginning.

The trial had been swift and brutal. The only thing stopping Dumbledore and the rest of the Wizengamot from sentencing him to the Dementors Kiss was the prophecy that he was the only one able to defeat the current Dark Lord.

Harry had agreed for the use of Veritaserum but after Priory Incantatem on his wand revealed the dark arts spell he had been learning, the jury decided he must have a way of circumventing the truth serum and discounted his testimony.

The court had been full of Order members as well as reporters and students from school. Ron's glare had practically drilled through his head and Hermione wouldn't even look at him.

It wasn't until a few days later, when he found the small piece of parchment that Snape had obviously slipped into the pocket of his robe as he dosed him with Veritaserum, that he knew why it was his closest friend couldn't even stand to look at him.

My Harry,

I know you had nothing to do with Neville's death. I know you better than anyone and I know you could not be capable of such darkness and I have told as many people as I can. Ron has been bragging about how he knew you were bad all along but I refuse to listen. Dumbledore has me spending the entire summer with the Weasley. I think he is trying to convert me to their way of thinking. It won't work Harry, I promise. I know it wasn't you and I promise, no matter how long it takes, I will find the truth and set you free.

I won't be able to look at you today, Dumbledore will be watching me along with the rest of the Order and I need them to think that I don't care anymore otherwise they will watch me all the time and I won't be able to find anything out. Just remember that I love you and I believe in you and we will set you free.

Don't forget that.

Love,

Your Hermione.

Harry had read the letter, tears streaming down his face. He had thought everyone had condemned him, but one person, one he care more about than any other, hadn't. Instead, making sure he knew she would stand by him and would find out the truth.

Almost every day he took out the parchment and read over what Hermione had to say. Telling himself to stay strong, that if anyone could find out the truth it would be Hermione.

He glanced once more at the parchment before tucking it into the tattered pocket of his robe and curling over onto his side and drifting off to sleep. Maybe he'd have that nice dream about Hermione and the two brown haired, green eyed children once again.

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It what he guessed was quite early the next morning, although with no windows it was hard to tell, when he heard the swish of robes and the tell tale murmur of an incantation to unlock his door. This had only happened several times over the first few weeks he was there as the guards all came down to have a look, and a go, at the Boy-Who-Lived.

The door swung open and soon Harry felt a hand on his shoulder, turning him over.

'Harry?' a soft whisper echoed in his head causing him to freeze instantly. 'Harry, look at me, please?' the soft voice pleaded.

Green eyes flickered open and he saw the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. 'Mione?' he rasped as he sat up slowly. His voice hoarse from lack of use as he spoke again. 'Mione, is it really you?'

'Oh Harry.' Hermione burst into tears, wrapping her arms around his neck and hugging him tightly.

Harry finally looked up at the others who had filed into his little cell and pulled violently away.

'What's he doing here?' he growled hoarsely, his green eyes glinting in anger at Dumbledore who was standing just inside the doorway.

'Shh, Harry. It's alright. He has to be here.' Hermione said soothingly.

'Miss Granger is right, Mr Potter.' Snape spoke up from the other corner, startling Harry. 'As the head of the Wizingamot, it is his duty to terminate your sentence and give you back your wand.' Harry wasn't sure, but he thought he could detect a hint of triumph in the potions master's voice.

'What?' Harry looked confused, his anger momentarily forgotten.

'It's over Harry.' Hermione said softly. 'Your free.'

'Free?' Harry whispered.

Hermione nodded, her eyes still filled with tears. 'It was Zabini and Montague with a little help from Peter Pettigrew.' She explained. 'I caught them last week and Professor Snape and I have been working ever since to get you out.'

'Free.' Harry whispered again, his eyes dropping to his hands as his tears threatened to fall. Hermione had come through. She had saved him as she had promised. Harry looked up into the brown eyes in front of him. 'Thank you.' He whispered. Hermione burst into tears again and hugged him once more.

'We really should be going, Mr Potter.' Snape said quietly. Harry nodded, pulling away but not letting go of Hermione's hand.

'There is just once task I must perform.' Dumbledore told him, pulling out his wand. Harry tensed but Hermione squeezed his hand soothingly. 'Finite Adstringo Azkaban.' The headmaster chanted, removing the ties that bound him to the prison before pulling Harry's wand from his pocket and handing it over. 'I am truly sorry, Harry.' He added.

'You should be.' Harry growled before hauling himself to his feet.

'Come on Harry.' Hermione said, ignoring the Headmaster and leading Harry towards the door and outside. The trip up from the depths of the prison was long but the minute Harry stepped outside, the sunlight burning his eyes and making tears fall once again, the smell of fresh air had him staggering.

Hermione just smiled at the look on his face and guided him down towards the boat that was waiting. It was only as they drew away from the dock that Harry realized the Dementors had not shown themselves that morning.

'They were locked away until we left.' Hermione whispered, correctly reading his expression.

Harry smiled. 'Even after all these years, you know me too well, Mione.' He murmured.

Hermione reached up to tuck the dirty lank hair back behind his ear. 'I never thought this day would come.' She said softly. 'I mean I hoped and I prayed but I never dreamed it would really happen.'

Harry rubbed softly on the back of her hand with his thumb. 'Thank you for believing in me, Mione. I will never be able to show you how much that meant.'

Hermione smiled and leaned over to place a soft kiss at his temple, dirt and all. 'Don't worry.' She said with a small smirk. 'You've got plenty of years yet to try.'

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On the other side of the boat sat Dumbledore and Snape both intently watching the interaction between the Boy-Who-Lived and his best friend.

'Harry is lucky to have Miss Granger.' Dumbledore observed.

'Mr Potter wouldn't need Miss Granger if you hadn't been such a suspicious old man.' Snape murmured.

'I know.'

'You have a lot to make up for Albus.' Severus chided softly. 'Your past lack of faith in Mr Potter will be your biggest hurdle.'

'You are correct Severus.' Dumbledore was silent for a moment. 'Do you think he will turn?'

Snape snorted loudly. 'Do you never learn?' he scolded, standing up and moving towards the front of the boat.

Dumbledore glanced over at the two ex Gryffindors sitting side by side, Hermione gently untangling the knots in Harry's hair before turning sad blue eyes back to the stiff backed man staring out across the water and shook his head. 'It seems not.' He said sadly.

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Chapter 2 – Convoluted Thoughts

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‘Where are we going?’ Harry asked softly.

Hermione pursed her lips. ‘Hogwarts.’ She said angrily.

Harry looked almost taken aback at the response. ‘Is that bad?’ he asked curiously.

Hermione sighed, her expression softening. ‘I just thought you might me uncomfortable there. I thought you might like to go somewhere else.’

‘I don’t have anywhere else to go, Mione.’ Harry whispered.

It was at that point that the boat finally reached the wharf on the other side. Gently Hermione helped Harry to stand and followed the two older wizards off the boat. The four walked several feet from the wharf and waited as Dumbledore pulled a hairbrush out of his pocket and held it out. Harry glanced at Hermione who smiled encouragingly as she placed a finger on the Portkey. Harry took a deep breath and placed his on too and with the usual hook behind the navel feeling they were gone.

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They landed with a pop and Harry felt a sob catch in his throat as he looked up at the castle he had thought was his home so many years before. The last time he had left, dragged unresisting in chains, he thought he would never see it again.

‘Alright there, Harry?’ Hermione asked softly.

Harry swallowed and nodded, refusing to let the tears in his eyes fall. ‘Yes.’ He said hoarsely.

The young woman smiled. ‘Come on.’ She said gently, taking his arm and propelling him towards the entrance doors.

It was still quite early and they quickly made their way to the set of rooms that had been set aside for Harry. Hermione guided him through the door and followed.

‘Thank you, Severus.’ She said softly before closing the door between them.

Dumbledore looked sadly at the closed portrait before turning and walking back in the direction of his office. Snape looked at the retreating figure and then back at the door. If he was honest with himself he knew that after what had happened it would not take much for Potter to turn. He knew by experience just how little it took. And he knew if that happened then the war would be over and the Dark Lord would win.

His life and every member of the Order's life would be forfeit. The light's only hope was Hermione. She alone would be the one thing that could pull him from the darkness.

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'Harry?' Hermione said tentatively as Harry just stood in the centre of the room and stared. 'Why don't you have a bath?' She suggested. Harry nodded but gave no sign of moving so Hermione took his hand and tugged him gently towards the bathroom. Slowly she ran a bath and filled it with bubbles. She realized that Harry must be in a bit of shock as he just stood staring at the bath, not making any move to rid himself of the rags he was wearing and get in. Averting her eyes she gently stripped him and helped him in making sure the bubbles covered him appropriately before spelling his hair wet and lathering it in shampoo. Harry closed his eyes as he felt the gentle hands rid his hair of four years of Azkaban filth. Automatically he reached for the soap and cloth and did the same to his body.

Two hours later, he was clean, pink skinned and shiny haired and Hermione helped him out of the bath once more, wrapping a towel around him and pushing him through to the bedroom and onto the bed.

'Harry, there's some pyjamas on the end of the bed. Why don't you have a rest? I'll send Dobby up with some food and I'll come back after classes have finished.' She promised.

Harry nodded and raised his head. 'Thanks Mione.' He said huskily. Hermione smiled and leaned down to kiss his cheek.

'It will get better Harry, I promise.' She said softly before quietly leaving the room. Harry looked down at the pyjamas but didn't put them on, instead removing the towel and sliding between the cool clean sheets and falling asleep.

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Snape looked up as the new Defense Professor stepped into the hall and walked up to the head table. None of the chattering students took

any notice as she came around and sat down next to the potions master, reaching for the jug of pumpkin juice between them.

'Is he okay?' Snape asked softly.

Hermione shrugged. 'Not really.' She replied, buttering a slice of toast and spreading it with some jam. 'Once we got into the room he seemed to go into shock. I made him have a bath and put him to bed but he said no more than two words the entire time.' She added sadly.

'How many classes do you have today?'

'Only three. I'll check on him at lunch before the last one. He should sleep for a while, he looked exhausted.' Hermione sighed as she sipped her juice.

Snape reached into his robe and pulled out two blue filled vials, placing them down on the table. 'I imagine Mr Potter's nightmarish sleep has not improved any.' He said quietly. Hermione smiled, picking up the vials of Dreamless Sleep and slipping them into her pocket.

'Thanks Severus.' She said softly.

'Do you think he will join us for dinner?'

Hermione shrugged again. 'I don't want to push him if he isn't ready.'

'No. Definitely not.' Snape agreed. They finished their breakfast in silence before going their separate ways.

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Hermione could hear the whimpering the moment she let herself into Harry's rooms at lunchtime and quickly hurried through to the bedroom, placing the tray of food she had been levitating on the desk and crossing to the bed.

Harry was tangled tightly in the sheets, his face and chest dripping in sweat as his nightmare refused to relinquish its hold on him. He

moaned, his hands reaching upwards as if to catch something as his head shook from side to side.

Hermione took his hands in hers. 'Harry. Harry, wake up. It's just a dream.' She said firmly, starting slightly as Harry's eyes blinked open and he shot up in bed. His breath was coming in heavy gasps as his gaze flicked wildly around the room. 'It's alright Harry. You're safe now.' Hermione said soothingly as she conjured a cloth and gently wiped the sweat from the young man's face.

Harry's breathing slowed and he caught the brown eyes looking at him in concern. 'Why?' he asked softly and Hermione's heart broke. His voice sounded so desolate, so broken and Hermione didn't know what to say. Harry took her silence as confusion and went on. 'Why did they send me there? Why did they leave me there?' A single tear made its way down Harry's face.

'I don't know, Harry.' Hermione said honestly.

'Did I do something wrong?'

'No.' Hermione said quickly, moving forward to wrap an arm around his shoulder. 'This wasn't your fault. People were just scared and easily tricked. They believed what they saw and what they were told.'

'No one trusted me.' Harry said sadly, looking down at his hands. Hermione reached up and lifted his chin.

'I trusted you Harry.' She said softly.

'Why?' Harry whispered.

Hermione smiled, tenderly cupping his cheek. 'Because I know you, Harry Potter.' She told him. 'I know you better than anyone and I didn't care if anyone saw you, I didn't care what Priority they got from your wand, I knew you could not have killed Neville anymore than Neville could have killed you.'

'But Ron knew me and he believed it.' Harry insisted.

Hermione snorted in disgust. 'Ron Weasley was, is, and will always be, an idiot.' Her voice was full of disdain. 'He wouldn't know a good person if he fell over them because he places far too much stock in rumours and lies.'

'I can't believe you stood by me all this time.' Harry sighed.

Hermione leaned forward and placed a chaste kiss on his lips. 'I told you over four and a half years ago that I loved you Harry.' The young man remembered the night before Christmas during his sixth year. Ron had gone home and Harry and Hermione were the only Gryffindors to have stayed that holiday. He remembered sitting by the fire, his arm around Hermione and her telling him exactly that. 'and I've been waiting for that long to see if you felt the same way.'

Harry's eyes softened. That had been the thing he had regretted most when he had been arrested. When Hermione had told him she loved him he hadn't known what to say. No one had really ever said that to him before, well, not that he could remember anyway. The five months between Christmas and his arrest had passed quickly but Harry had worked out exactly how he felt and had planned on telling Hermione the night of the Leaving Feast. Unfortunately fate had intervened and that night never came to be in Harry's world.

'Hermione.' He whispered, huskily, taking both her hands in his. 'I do love you, I'm sorry I never told you before. When you told me, I didn't know what to say. It took me some time to work out exactly how I felt and I planned to tell you at the Leaving Feast. It was my biggest mistake. I should never have waited. That first night in.... A...azkaban.' Harry stumbled over the name. 'all my thoughts were about you and I promised myself that if I ever got out I would make sure never to wait for anything every again. I love you, Hermione Granger, more than yesterday and less than tomorrow.' He finished fervently, leaning forwards and kissing her passionately.

After a moment they pulled away, green eyes staring intently into brown. Hermione could see the storm raging in Harry's eyes and smiled to show she understood.

'I have to get back to class but I'll be back later, okay.' She said calmly, pulling the Dreamless Sleep from her pocket and placing

them on the table. 'Have something to eat and rest a bit more and I'll tell you everything you want to know.'

Harry smiled sheepishly. She really did know how to read him. With one last kiss she practically skipped from the room, leaving Harry to snicker softly at her antics before turning with interest at the tray of food on the nearby desk.

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Later that night Hermione called up dinner and as they ate told Harry exactly what had happened since that fateful May day.

'What happened to everyone else?' Harry asked tentatively as he lay down his fork. There was no way he could eat that much food in one go.

Hermione sighed. 'A lot of us went into the Aurors after school. Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Justin, Colin, even Lavender.'

Harry raised an eyebrow. 'Us?' he asked softly. 'You too?'

Hermione blushed. 'Yes. Albus asked me to teach after I graduated but I couldn't. I knew someone out there knew what had happened to you and together with Severus I was going to find out who it was.'

'Professor Snape helped you?' Harry couldn't mask his shock, he wasn't sure why he was so surprised. The man had tried to get him out of the castle before he was arrested. Together they moved over to the sofa by the fire.

Hermione nodded a sly smile on her face. 'He was one.' She said cryptically.

'Who else?'

Hermione's grin became larger. 'Draco.'

Harry gaped at her. 'Malfoy?' he said incredulously. 'Malfoy helped you help me?'

Hermione snorted. 'He's grown up Harry. We all have. What happened to you shocked many people. Some more than others. There were quite a few who never believed it. Draco was the one who helped catch Pettigrew and the others.'

Harry shook his head. He could only remember the looks of hate as he was dragged away after his trial. 'Who else helped?'

Hermione smiled gently. 'I think I'll let them tell you.' She said quietly. 'They'll be here tomorrow, if you want to see them.' Harry tensed slightly before nodding, Hermione leaning over to place a hand on top of his. 'They won't judge you, Harry.' She said softly. 'They never have.'

Harry smiled, grasping her hand in his and lifting it to his lips before his face became grave. 'Ron?' he asked tentatively.

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'That boy, I swear.' She muttered under her breath. 'Ron also went for Auror training.' Harry eyes widened.

'How on earth did he manage that?' Harry asked, remembering his friend's rather abysmal grades.

Hermione smirked. 'Oh he studied hard in seventh year, but unfortunately he failed the written portion of the Auror exam.' She snickered. Harry stared at her before he too snorted.

'You're kidding?'

Hermione shook her head, her face red as she struggled to contain her laughter. 'He passed all the physical and magical training, but the written section, for the finals, well, let's just say, there weren't many left who would help him study.'

'Why not?' Harry asked curiously.

Hermione smirked again, her eyes shining. 'He had been, um, mouthing off about things.'

'What things?' Harry cut in.

'Well...' she trailed off. 'You, to be exact.' She said quietly.

'But the others agreed with him.' Harry insisted. 'Why wouldn't they help him?'

The smirk was back. 'Let's just say that Draco Malfoy can be most persuasive.'

Harry was gaping again. 'You mean Malfoy actually threatened everyone if they helped him?'

Hermione nodded. 'Yeah, it was so cool.'

'B..but how?' Harry was speechless.

'I think Severus had something to do with it.' Hermione said honestly.

Harry looked thoughtful. 'Did he really believe me, all this time?' he asked hesitantly.

Hermione nodded. 'From the very beginning.' She told him. 'He was the one to come to me in the first place. I was quite surprised that the one person who was so convinced of your innocence was the one who spent six years trying to get you kicked out of school.' Harry only smiled mysteriously before yawning widely.

'Excuse me.' He said sheepishly.

Hermione grinned, grabbing his hand and hauling him up off the sofa. 'Bed.' She said sternly, standing, kissing his cheek and heading towards the door and her own rooms. Harry stilled her movement.

'Stay.' He pleaded softly, taking her in his arms and kissing her softly. 'Nothing will happen.' He promised. 'I just want to hold you.' Hermione smiled and kissed him back before nodding and following Harry into the bedroom. Silently they undressed, Harry removing the robe he had put on and Hermione just leaving a t-shirt and knickers on as she crawled under the sheets and curled up on Harry's arms, but not before handing him a blue filled vial and giving him a look that brokered no argument about it being taken.

Harry snorted and downed it before hugging her to him as he drifted off. Hermione could scarcely breathe. Her dream of over five years had finally come true and with a smile she snuggled into Harry's arms, summoning a parchment and quill and sending out several notes, having to get up an hour later to sneak them up to the owlery. Harry hadn't moved in her absence and with a grin she snuggled back in to the waiting arms, smiling as Harry unconsciously pulled her closer.

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Harry woke late the next morning after the best night's sleep he had had in over seven years. He could hear voices in the room outside and quickly washed and changed before slowly opening the door and stepping into the sitting room.

'Harry.' Hermione said, jumping quickly off the sofa to embrace him. Harry kissed her softly before turning to the two men who had stood and were watching him, fairly inscrutable expressions on their faces. Harry walked over until he was standing and looking up at them. These two men had been instrumental in his release and he felt tears fill his eyes as he spoke. Turning to the blonde, he held out his hand.

'Thank you.' He whispered hoarsely. Draco Malfoy smiled, his grey eyes sparkling as he clasped Harry's hand in his.

'You're welcome Harry.' He said softly. Harry turned his green eyes to meet concerned black.

'P...Professor.' Harry stammered. 'I...I...can't even begin to thank you for everything.'

'You should have listened to me in the first place Potter.' Snape said, brow raised.

Harry hung his head, his hands wringing in front of him. 'I know.' He said softly. 'I'm sorry.' Harry heard the potions master sniff disdainfully before finding strong black clad arms wrapped around him in a loose hug.

'It's good that have you back, Potter.' Snape said quietly. Finally Snape released him and Harry looked up.

‘Thank you, Sir.’ He whispered.

Snape arched another eyebrow. ‘And if any of you tell anyone I did that I will use your entrails for potions ingredients.’ He added sternly.

Malfoy snorted, Harry snickered and Hermione giggled as the group of four sat down to a late breakfast.

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Two hours later several more people made their way slowly to Harry’s rooms. As Hermione heard the knock she got up and answered the door.

‘Harry, there are a few more people here to see you.’

Harry stood nervously as four people filed slowly through the door. As he looked from one to the next his mouth dropped wider and wider.

‘Are you waiting for something to fly in there and nest, Potter?’ Snape drawled.

Harry’s mouth snapped closed as his eyes continued looking at the four people in front of him. ‘I...I don’t understand.’ Harry stammered.

‘Ron’s a prat.’ Fred said cheerfully.

‘An idiot.’ George added.

‘And you’re family Harry. We knew you couldn’t have done it.’ Bill chimed in.

‘It was no secret how Professor Snape felt about what happened to you and as soon as Hermione finished the Auror training her feelings were also made rather public and we wanted to do anything we could to help, so we went to them.’ Charlie said sincerely.

Harry stared from one red head to another, opening his mouth to speak but nothing came out. Suddenly his knees buckled and he sat abruptly. Hermione was at his side in an instant.

‘Harry?’ she whispered taking his hand in hers. ‘Are you alright?’

Harry opened his mouth again, desperately trying to say what he wanted. 'I...I....' he began. 'I j...just. I...I...' He gave up, instead just shaking his head helplessly. Surprisingly it was Malfoy who put into words exactly how Harry was feeling.

'You're not used to having people believe in you for anything other than being the Boy-Who-Lived.' The Slytherin said knowingly.

Harry stared at the blond man, nodding slightly before turning back to the Weasleys who had sat down nearby. 'I...I just don't know how I'm ever going to thank all of you.'

'We told you Harry, you're family. That's thanks enough.' Bill said firmly.

Harry paled and before anyone could stop him he bolted to the bathroom, Hermione quickly following. Malfoy and Snape exchanged glances, wincing as they heard what little Harry had eaten for breakfast come right back up again.

They appeared several minutes later, Harry looking flushed and sweaty as Hermione guided him carefully over to the sofa and pushed him down and Snape conjured a glass of water and handed it over.

'Alright there, Harry?' Fred asked tentatively.

Harry nodded taking another sip of water. 'Fine, thanks.'

Malfoy snorted. 'Oh yes, Harry. You definitely look fine.'

'Sod off Malfoy.' Harry said tiredly.

'Draco.' Malfoy retorted.

'What?'

'I think after helping get your scrawny arse out of there the least you can do is call me Draco.' Malfoy insisted.

Harry snorted softly, a small smile gracing his lips. 'Sorry Draco.' He whispered. Malfoy grinned sitting back down as Hermione conjured several more chairs.

'So, what now?' Bill asked as he and the rest of the Weasleys sat down.

Harry's head snapped up. 'What do you mean?' he asked curiously.

'Well, now that Plan A has been completed.' He grinned at Harry. 'It's time to move to Plan B.'

Harry wasn't fooled by the smile on the eldest Weasley's face and his eyes narrowed slightly, a rather menacing sight with the large circles under them. 'What, exactly is Plan B, and why do I have the feeling that it somehow involves me and I'm not going to like it.' He said quietly.

'You're such a cynic, Harry.' George mock scolded.

Harry arched an eyebrow, an expression left over from spending far too much time with a certain potions master. 'I didn't use to be.' He said slowly.

'Point to Harry.' George conceded.

Harry sighed, placing the glass down on the table beside him and running a hand through his hair. 'Go ahead.'

Draco seemed to straighten in his seat as if he was now the designated speaker. 'Plan B is to capture Tom and bring him to you so that you can kill him.' He said simply.

Harry's mouth dropped open and he stared at the people arrayed in front of him, all of whom were looking back at him innocently, well, all except Hermione, who was glaring at Malfoy and the Weasleys and Snape who was studying the painting above the fireplace intently. Suddenly Harry burst out laughing, startling the others in the room. They all waited patiently for several minutes until Harry seemed to realize no one else was laughing and his amusement died down.

‘You are joking.’ He gasped breathlessly. ‘Tell me you’re joking.’

‘No.’ Charlie said seriously.

Harry’s face drained of blood. ‘You can’t. It’s too dangerous.’ He whispered. ‘Have you gone out of your minds. Do you, any of you, even realize what that monster is capable of?’ Harry leapt up off the sofa once more and began pacing in front of the fire. ‘I’ve watched him almost every day for the last four years. I know what he’s done and what he will do.’ Sad looks were exchanged as it dawned on them that even in Azkaban Harry had had to suffer through the visions and the nightmares. ‘Professor, you can’t seriously be agreeing with them. I know you haven’t been summoned in over two years.’ Snape’s brow raised at that remark but he stayed silent. ‘but surely you remember what he was like, he has only got more powerful. You can’t just let them march to their deaths. Too many have already died.’ Harry was almost pleading with the older wizard.

‘I don’t agree with them, but what else can we do? You can’t just walk in there by yourself.’ Snape drawled.

‘Why not?’ Harry asked with a shrug. ‘The Death Eaters will take my wand but we both know that won’t really make any difference. I’m expendable. Once Tom is dead it really doesn’t matter.’

‘Harry.’ Hermione gave a horrified whisper. ‘You can’t honestly mean that.’

Harry shrugged. ‘Too many have died.’ Was all he said.

‘Harry none of that was your fault.’ Fred tried to sooth the young man. ‘You-Know-Who kills. It’s a fact.’

‘What about Cedric and Sirius and Neville? You can’t say they weren’t.’

‘Who can you say they were?’ Malfoy asked incredulously.

‘I told Cedric to take the cup with me. Tom lured Sirius to the Department of Mysteries because of me and Neville, well, they Polyjuiced as me didn’t they?’ Harry insisted.

‘Merlin, Potter.’ Snape growled, pinching his nose. ‘You have the most convoluted thought patterns I’ve ever seen. If I didn’t know for a fact that you hated the attention I would honestly think you purposed went round and round until it all came back to you. For once in your life just look at what you contribute instead of turning things inside out and upside down. You know, in all truth, I think you blame everything on yourself in the hope that it will, in your view, lower everyone’s expectations of you.’ He finished loudly as Harry stared at the man. It was the longest diatribe he had ever said to him.

‘Point to Severus.’ George said quietly.

‘I...I...well....’ Harry trailed off.

‘Good.’ Snape said curtly. ‘Now sit down and at least hear them out before you get all over protective and hero like. A few of their ideas may even work.’

Harry was too stunned to say anything instead sitting down and closing his mouth, promising himself he would hear everyone out before making any decisions, as Malfoy began to talk.

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Chapter 3 – Working together

‘Merlin, Potter.’ Snape growled, pinching his nose. ‘You have the most convoluted thought patterns I’ve ever seen. If I didn’t know for a fact that you hated the attention I would honestly think you purposely went round and round until it all came back to you. For once in your life just look at what you contribute instead of turning things inside out and upside down. You know, in all truth, I think you blame everything on yourself in the hope that it will, in your view, lower everyone’s expectations of you.’ He finished loudly as Harry stared at the man. It was the longest diatribe he had ever said to him.

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They sat there for four hours, thankfully it was Saturday and there were no classes to go to. Draco outlined the four different options they had come up with and Harry vetoed all but one. Explaining that with what he had seen over the last four years during his visions something that would preclude each one for various reasons. The fourth one however had promise. Harry stood and began pacing in front of the fireplace, his hand running quickly through his hair. The others could see he was trembling slightly but no one was going to tell him to sit down.

‘It might work.’ He mumbled. ‘If we made sure he was there. Getting back could be hard.’ Harry continued murmuring softly to himself. It became obvious that the more Harry paced the stronger and more confident he became. As he went over and over the plans in his head his presence returned and the aura he was unknowingly projecting

grew stronger and stronger. The others exchanged glances, none realising just how much Harry's magic had built while he was surrounded by the power draining wards around Azkaban Prison.

Suddenly he stopped and turned to face the interested watchers. 'It will work.' He said firmly. 'But I'm coming with you.'

'Harry.' Hermione gasped. 'No.'

Harry shook his head. 'You can't transport him. Tandem apparition won't work and it would take far too long to get the anti- apparition and anti-Portkey wards down anyway. I wouldn't be in the way. I'm sure I can help. Besides, if I work at it I'm sure I can be as strong as most of you.'

Severus snorted as the others in the room exchanged amused glances. 'Of that I have no doubt, Mr Potter.'

'I'm serious.' Harry pleaded.

'No, you're not, you're Harry.' Fred chuckled.

Harry rolled his eyes, ignoring the Weasley twin. 'I'll work really hard. I know I never finished school.'

'Neither did we.' George muttered.

'But I promise I'll train hard until I can keep up with you. I won't hold you back.' Harry went on.

Draco laughed. 'Harry.' He said shaking his head. 'You have no idea.'

'What?'

The Slytherin eyed him carefully. 'Follow me. Hermione, bring his wand.' He said curtly, standing and striding across the room and out the door.

Everyone piled out of the room after the blond, following him down one corridor, thankfully not meeting any students, and into the DADA

classroom. Draco banished the desks and chairs and stood in the centre of the room. 'Harry, come here.'

Harry looked curiously at him before taking his proffered wand and crossing to stand in front of the other man. Draco raised his wand in front of his face and bowed, Harry repeating the gesture before automatically turning and taking ten paces.

'Expelliarmus.' Draco yelled and Harry hearing the curse crackling towards him, dropped to the floor, rolled and stood up again.

'Evertate Staffra.' Harry yelled and Draco ducked, immediately sending another hex in his direction.

'Petrificus Totalis.' Harry again. 'Stupefy.' One after another Harry yelled spells at the blond, ducking and weaving every time he saw another hurtling in his direction and managing to hit the Auror several times.

Draco retaliated in kind but all too soon Harry was panting heavily and collapsed to the floor. Severus had hold of Hermione's arm as Draco walked over to look down at his old enemy, blood leaking from a cut on his forehead, staining the white blond hair and a pronounced limp in his step resulting from an especially strong Tarantellegra jinx.

'Harry,' Draco crouched down stiffly so he was eye to eye with the shorter man. 'You lack of strength lies only in here.' He said, reaching up and placing his hand on Harry's head. 'Your heart is strong, your will is stronger and as soon as you are fitter the only thing holding you back will be your mind. You have to believe in yourself as we do in you.' Harry found his eyes filling with tears once more and dropped his head, only to find it grasped softly and lifted to see grey eyes looking proudly back at him. 'We believe in you Harry. We all know you can do this. All you need to do is believe it yourself.'

'T...thank you.' Harry stammered hoarsely.

'Harry?' Hermione and the others had crossed the room and now helped the Gryffindor to his feet.

Harry gave her a small smile. 'I'm fine.' He said softly.

The four Weasley's exchanged glances. 'Freaked out, insecure, neurotic and emotional.' They chanted in unison.

Harry arched an eyebrow before snorting. 'I am not freaked out.' He said firmly, his mouth twitching.

The others exchanged glances before bursting out laughing. Hermione grinning brightly as they snuck back along the corridor to Harry's rooms. They all waited in the sitting room as Hermione marched Harry into bed as only she could, insisting he take a Dreamless Sleep and get some rest. She would wake him for dinner, she promised. Harry, feeling extremely wrung out complied with no thought of complaint and within moments he had drifted off and Hermione returned to the others.

'Thank you Draco.' She said, sitting down and taking the cup of tea Bill offered after healing the cut on Draco forehead and the twisted ankle. Draco smiled in thanks.

'We have a problem.' Charlie stated suddenly. All but Severus looked at him curiously.

'It will take some time but I'm sure Harry will come to believe in himself as we do.' Hermione replied. Charlie glanced at the potions master.

'I don't believe that what Mr Weasley meant, is it?' Severus asked.

Charlie shook his head. 'No. Did anyone else take note of what spells Harry was throwing?' Again all but Severus shook their heads, even Draco after several moments thought.

'Nothing above third year.' Severus supplied.

Charlie nodded. 'They may have been stronger than normal.'

'I'll say.' Draco muttered.

'But they still were light spells.' Charlie added. 'He didn't send anything that could have been even remotely construed as harmful. Draco was only injured when that hex caused him to scratch his own

forehead with his nail and he twisted his ankle dodging that last stupefy. Harry did nothing to harm him at all.'

'Maybe he just didn't want to hurt Draco.' Bill suggested.

Severus shook his head. 'Maybe, but I have my doubts.' He shifted slightly in his seat, not elaborating any further.

Hermione looked at the time. 'There is an Order meeting tonight?' she questioned.

Bill nodded. 'Are you coming or will you stay here with Harry?'

'Albus asked if Harry would come.' She scoffed softly.

'What?' Fred asked incredulously. 'Dumbledore wants him in the same room as Ron and the other idiots.'

The bushy haired witch glanced at the bedroom door before nodding.

'What will you do?' George leaned forward in his chair.

Hermione shrugged. 'Ask Harry if he wants to go.' She said simply.

'Are you nuts?' Draco said incredulously, quieting only when he felt Severus' hand on his shoulder.

'It is Harry's decision, Draco.' He said firmly. 'He has to work with them, unfortunately. We will need them when the time comes.'

'But the Weasel will be there.' Draco insisted, suddenly clapping his hand over his mouth and turning to the red heads who were all staring at him in amusement. 'No offence intended.' He mumbled through his fingers.

Bill laughed. 'None taken, you should hear what we call him on occasion.' The other Weasleys all sniggered softly.

Severus sighed and stood up. 'There are about five hours left before dinner and I have essays to grade. I'll see you all tonight.' He said curtly before walking swiftly from the room. Draco waving a quick good bye and darting out after him.

‘Severus. Severus, wait.’ He called out, hurrying to catch up with him.

‘Yes, Draco.’ Severus asked.

‘What’s the matter? You look...well, disturbed.’

‘I’m concerned Draco. That is all.’

‘Are you worried about Harry?’

Severus rolled his eyes. ‘That has to be the most absurd question you’ve ever said, Mr Malfoy. Of course I’m concerned about Harry.’ He snapped.

Draco raised an eyebrow. It was not often one saw the potions master quite so unhinged. ‘What about Harry?’

Severus rolled his eyes again and growled. ‘I have work to do. I will see you tonight.’ He said tersely, spinning on his heel and stalking off towards the dungeons.

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It was just before nine when they all gathered in Snape’s chambers. Draco and the Weasley’s having spent the afternoon fooling around in Hogsmeade before returning to Hogwarts to sneak dinner from the house elves in the kitchens.

Harry had woken and had joined them before they dragged him down to Severus’ rooms. He had been quite lucky in his few jaunts outside his room that he had seen no students. It was almost as if he had unconsciously cast a repelling charm on himself.

Hermione had told him about the Order meeting when he woke and asked him if he wanted to go. Harry had thought about it for some time before deciding that as much as he hated the thought of being in the same room as so many people who hadn’t trusted him, he needed to know exactly what was going on.

The others could see the tense set of his shoulders and the grim line of his mouth as they waited to floo through to Grimmauld Place.

Hermione squeezed his hand as the Weasleys went first. 'Just remember what we talked about.' She said softly. Harry smiled wanly and nodded, taking a handful of floo powder and throwing it into the fire.

'Grimmauld Place.' Harry called out, coughing as the smoke and ash went up his nose.

Several sets of strong arms caught him and set him on his feet as he tumbled out at the other end. Thankfully the room was deserted and as soon as Hermione and the two Slytherins came through they headed towards the kitchen where they knew Dumbledore and the others would be waiting.

The soft murmur of voices drifted through the door but they were silenced instantly as the Weasleys knocked and opened the door, stepping one after another through the space. They stopped just inside the door, gesturing for the others to join them. Draco and Severus went first, Hermione kissing Harry softly and squeezing his hand before pulling him gently to stand among his friends. All eyes in the room were riveted to the young man who gazed coolly back at those who had had no faith.

'Good evening Harry.' Dumbledore said cheerfully. Harry flinched slightly before nodding, not trusting himself to speak. He could feel the weight of a certain set of eyes but studiously avoided looking in that direction. 'Won't you sit down?' The headmaster gestured to the right side of the table which was almost completely free of people. The two unfortunate souls, fairly new recruits to the Order, that had sat down there were quickly removed courtesy of Snape's most venomous glare. Harry smirked inwardly although his face remained blank as he sat between Hermione and Severus.

'Harry.' Ron started and Harry flinched again, dropping his head to look at his hands in his lap. 'I'm sorry.'

'Close your mouth, Weasley.' Severus snapped. 'Harry has not come to hear your platitudes of regret.'

'Sod off you greasy git.' Ron hissed.

‘Ronald Weasley.’ Molly scolded.

‘Harry doesn’t want to hear it Weasel.’ Draco sneered.

‘Shut up, ferret. Like you would have any idea of what Harry wants or doesn’t want.’ Ron yelled, face red in anger.

Draco sat back, a large smirk crossing his face. ‘I would know a hell of a lot more than you.’ He countered.

‘Yeah right.’

‘Mr Weasley, do sit down.’ Snape drawled. ‘You’re childish displays of temper are dreadfully unbecoming from a man of your stature. Oh that’s right, you work in the Ministry. You have no stature.’ The older Weasley boys were sniggering madly as Ron, if possible, reddened even more.

‘I’ll have you know.’ Ron blustered.

‘SHUT UP.’ Harry yelled, slamming his hands down on the table as he stood up abruptly, startling everyone. ‘No bloody wonder Voldemort is winning.’ Most in the room flinched. ‘Do you act like five year olds in every meeting or is this one particularly unique. Ron, Severus is right, you have to learn to control your temper, and you two,’ he said turning to the two Slytherins at his left. ‘Do you really find it necessary to provoke him at every opportunity?’

‘Not really necessary, but certainly entertaining.’ Draco concluded, causing most of the right side of the table to break out in giggles again.

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘This war is bad enough outside the room without continuing it in here. I don’t know if I can ever trust any of you again after your complete failure to trust me when I needed it most,’ Hermione and the others knew he wasn’t talking to them. ‘But I am willing to work with you to destroy Tom Riddle because I can’t do it without you and you certainly can’t do it without me. Now I see no reason for me to stay, I am obviously causing a distraction that we can ill afford. Goodnight.’ Harry finished his little speech before

turning and striding from the room. Most of the room was gaping at the open doorway.

‘Matured, hasn’t he?’ Moody thought out loud.

‘I daresay you have a lot of time to grow up when you’re sitting in a cell doing nothing for four years.’ Hermione said snidely, glaring at Ron across the table. Severus reached over and placed a calming hand on Hermione’s arm.

‘It’s alright. He will find his way back.’ He murmured as Charlie, who had been leaning against the wall behind Harry, sat down in the now vacant chair.

‘Mr Potter is correct.’ Dumbledore said firmly. ‘We can not afford the time and energy it takes to fight. The Order has been split over the last four years for reasons we could not control.’

Hermione snorted derisively.

Dumbledore’s eyes dulled slightly. ‘Now is the time to unite once again so we can finally rid the world of Voldemort. We need to be together on this. There is no other way.’

‘Stirring speech.’ Draco mumbled and Snape’s mouth twitched. Dumbledore ignored them and glanced at the faces around the room.

‘Good.’ He said with a nod. ‘Let’s get to work.’

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Harry read the note, his brow furrowed. Why would Hermione want him to meet her at the Three Broomsticks? Three days had passed since that ill fated Order meeting and Harry had yet to set foot in the great hall. Harry shrugged, maybe she wanted to have a quiet lunch, just the two of them, why she just didn’t think to have it in her rooms he didn’t know, but she had always been a little odd like that.

He rifled through his trunk looking for his cloak when he realised the twins must have ‘appropriated’ it for a prank. Even at twenty three they were still thirteen at heart. Harry groaned softly before heading

to the door. There was still fifteen minutes of the last class before lunch and if he hurried he could get out of the castle and down to Hogsmeade before the students saw him. He would be early for lunch but he figured he could just sit with a Butterbeer until she arrived.

He crept stealthily down the corridors and snuck out the doors, heading swiftly in the direction of the wizarding village. The sun was warm on his shoulders and he actually enjoyed the feeling of freedom he found on the silent walk. He had barely been outside since he arrived.

It was almost with reluctance that he reached the pub and went inside. There weren't many people there, two men in dark cloaks, huddled together and whispering in a corner, a drunk almost under the table by the side window and two hags sitting at the bar, mumbling about something Harry couldn't quite discern.

After an initial shock Madame Rosemerta smiled brightly at him, bringing him a Butterbeer with a menu, on the house, she said cheerfully. Harry blushed and sunk down in his chair, sipping his drink and praying for Hermione to hurry up.

Twenty minutes and two Butterbeers later the door opened and Hermione walked in. Harry waved and she crossed the room towards him. Before she could get more than three feet however, the two men in the corner hit her with a body bind and began hurling curses at Harry.

Harry dropped to the floor, immediately firing off several disarming charms. He tried to crawl over to Hermione but found his way blocked. The taller of the two men pointed his wand and cast Tormentia, a sister spell of the Cruciatus without as much strength. It was not an Unforgivable. Yet.

Harry bit his lip, inwardly screaming at the pain as he raised his wand and concentrating hard enough to send off another hex in the cloaked man's direction.

The man stumbled backwards, lifting the curse and Harry leapt to his feet, breathing hard, the adrenalin pumping through him as he fought. It was then he noticed the smaller figure point his wand at Hermione,

an incantation on his lips. Harry saw red, disarming the smaller man with an extremely strong stunning spell before turning his attention back to the taller one. The dueling style looked familiar, Harry couldn't quite place it, but within ten minutes Harry had disarmed him as well.

He rushed over to Hermione as the others the two hags, the drunk and Rosemerta came out from where they had sheltered.

'Mione.' Harry gasped, releasing her. 'Oh god, Mione, are you alright?'

Hermione smiled, rubbing her head which had hit the floor rather hard. Having been body bound and not stunned meant she had been able to see the whole thing and she glanced at the two bound men before back at Harry.

'I'm fine, Harry.' She said firmly.

'Oh good.' Harry murmured before his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed to the floor.

'Wore him out good and proper.' The drunk said as his face morphed into a familiar redhead with long hair and an earring.

'I'm not surprised.' Rosemerta scolded as her face thinned and lightened until Charlie Weasley stared back at him. 'What was Severus thinking, casting Tormentia on him?'

'I wanted to see if a threat to his life might change his reasoning.' Snape scowled as the two hags, who had turned into Fred and George as their Polyjuice wore off unbound him and Draco and helped them up, removing their white masks in the process and turning them back into the napkins that had been on the table.

'I still think that was a little mean.' Hermione chided, lifting Harry's head and placing her robe under it before brushing back the sweaty hair on his face.

'I don't.' Draco groaned, rubbing his shoulder where it had hit a table when he fell. 'That stunning hex was bloody strong.'

Hermione smirked, rubbing the back of her head again. 'Well, you're cushioning charms could use some work, you know.'

Draco blushed. 'Sorry, Severus was just too quick and I could hardly get the incantation out before you fell.'

Fred handed Severus a piece of parchment. 'This was every spell he cast.' He said with a sigh.

Severus scanned it before groaning softly. 'We have a huge problem.' He told them.

'What was the worst one?' Draco asked, not being able to remember everything that was sent.

'Rictasempra.'

'Bloody hell.' Draco swore.

'So, after all that, what do we know?' Bill asked quietly.

'We know he is scared to cast anything serious.' Severus told him.

'But why?' Charlie asked. Most around the room shrugged.

'Priory Incantatem.' Hermione whispered, stroking Harry's cheek tenderly before looking up. 'He was convicted last time by Priory. Without it, the questioning under Veritaserum would have made sense under a Polyjuice defense, but when the Priory brought that spell out of his wand they said he must have circumvented the Veritaserum and threw it out. In the end it was what convicted him and sent him to that horrible place.'

Silence reigned as they thought over that statement, no one really sure of what to say. 'We should get back to the school before the afternoon classes.' Severus said finally.

'Got to get back to the shop.' Fred and George crossed the room and grabbed some floo powder off the mantle and disappeared through the green flames.

'Draco, will you go and let Rosemerta know we have finished and that we are very grateful.' Hermione said softly. Draco nodded and disappeared up the stairs as Hermione raised her wand.

'I'll take him.' Snape offered, bending down and scooping the younger man up in his arms before she could levitate him.

Bill and Charlie exchanged an amused glance that was quickly quashed by a glare in their direction as Hermione pulled out Harry's invisibility cloak and draped it over him.

'Let's go.' Snape said as Draco joined them and the group walked slowly back up to the school.

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Harry slept right through the afternoon, waking late that evening and having dinner before going back to bed. He had asked Hermione what had happened to the two Death Eaters but she had told him just to rest, she would explain everything tomorrow. He slept right through after she plied him with another Dreamless Sleep.

When he woke he found Hermione, Draco and Severus all peering down at him.

'You do know it's bloody creepy when people watch you sleep.' He grumbled, sitting up and rubbing his eyes before reaching for his glasses.

Draco snorted. 'How would you know? You were asleep.'

Harry scowled. 'Alright, it's bloody creepy when you wake up with people watching you. Happy.'

Draco snorted again but Hermione shushed him and sat on the edge of the bed. 'Harry.'

'What happened yesterday? With the Death Eaters.' Harry asked suddenly.

'They weren't Death Eaters, Harry. That was Draco and myself.' Snape said quietly.

Harry looked between them, a confused expression on his face. 'But...why?'

'We wanted to check something.'

Harry was still looking confused when it suddenly dawned on him and his eyes turned stony. 'You stunned Hermione.' He said incredulously, his anger very evident.

Said witch burst out laughing. 'Oh Harry,' she chuckled. 'Don't be angry. I knew it was coming. There were cushioning charms ready.' Draco snorted again.

Severus crossed the few steps to the bed and handing Harry a book.

'Focus. The Art and Science of Wandless Magic.' Harry read the cover aloud. 'What...'

'There is no Priory with wandless magic, Harry.' Snape said softly. Harry's eyes snapped up and his face paled.

'H...how...'

'That is what yesterday was about. You cannot defeat the Dark Lord with tickling charms and disarming spells.' The potions master explained.

Harry glanced down at the book before nodding. 'I know.' He whispered.

'Unfortunately there is only one person who can teach that particular skill.' Snape added.

Harry looked up again. 'Who?'

Severus sighed, glancing at Hermione who had taken Harry's hand in hers before answering.

'Albus Dumbledore.'

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Chapter 4 – You didn't betray me.

'Focus. The Art and Science of Wandless Magic.' Harry read the cover aloud. *'What...'*

'There is no Priory with wandless magic, Harry.' Snape said softly. *Harry's eyes snapped up and his face paled.*

'H...how...'

'That is what yesterday was about. You cannot defeat the Dark Lord with tickling charms and disarming spells.' The potions master explained.

Harry glanced down at the book before nodding. 'I know.' He whispered.

'Unfortunately there is only one person who can teach that particular skill.' Snape added.

Harry looked up again. 'Who?'

Severus sighed, glancing at Hermione who had taken Harry's hand in hers before answering.

'Albus Dumbledore.'

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'No.' Harry whispered, emphatically shaking his head.

'Harry, he is the only one who can show you.' Hermione insisted.

'No.' Harry's voice was louder and he yanked his hand back and scooted over to the side of the bed, pushing back the covers before standing.

'Potter, be reasonable. Albus is your only chance.' Severus growled and angry green eyes shot up, piercing through him.

'How dare you tell me to be reasonable about this.' Harry hissed. *'You expect me to put my life, my future in the hands of the one*

person who failed me more than any other. You want me to learn to trust him after he never trusted me.' He bellowed, leaning down and violently snatching the book back off the bed. 'I will learn this on my own. I don't need *him*.' With that Harry stalked across the room and into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

'Well, that went better than expected.' Draco said wryly, waving his wand and dropping the shielding charm he had around him.

Hermione and Severus looked at him incredulously. 'And just how did you expect it to go?' Hermione snapped. Suddenly there was a muffled boom and what sounded like most of the bathroom exploding filtered through the closed door.

'More like that.' Draco said simply, nodding at the door. Hermione glared at him before darting around the bed and across to the bathroom.

'Harry. Harry, are you alright?' she called out.

'I'm fine.' Harry bellowed through the door.

'Harry, can I come in?'

'No. Just go away. Please, Mione, just go away.' Harry's voice had lowered, sounding almost broken. Hermione glanced over at the two Slytherins. Severus shook his head and gestured to the door.

'Alright Harry, I have to go to breakfast now. I'll send one of the house elves up with some food for you.'

'Thanks.' Came the whispered reply and Hermione could just picture Harry sitting on the floor, his back against the door, arms wrapped around his knees and his forehead resting on them. She was loathe to leave him but eventually Severus walked over and took her arm and the three left the room and headed down to the great hall.

At the door they stopped, Draco wrapping an arm around Hermione and kissing her cheek. 'Don't worry Mione, he'll be okay.' Hermione sighed and nodded. 'Anyway,' Draco said cheerfully. 'I had better get back or Kingsley will make me clean up after the first years again.'

The Slytherin visibly shuddered and Hermione couldn't help but snort. Draco Malfoy hadn't really changed, he still felt menial tasks were far beneath him. It was one of the reasons Shacklebolt always used it, in various forms, for punishment during their Auror Training, and even now wasn't adverse to indulging in it if Draco didn't listen or was late.

'Thanks Draco, I'll see you next Saturday.' Malfoy nodded, shaking Snape's hand before disappearing out the front doors of the castle as the potions master pushed open the heavy oak doors to the great hall and gestured for Hermione to go in first.

'I've never seen him that angry.' Hermione murmured as the two made their way up to the head table watched by a pair of concerned blue eyes.

Severus pulled out Hermione's chair before sitting down himself and cast a surreptitious silencing charm around them that he was sure the headmaster had noticed anyway. 'His mood swings are quite disturbing.' He agreed. 'and the misplaced anger is quite a concern. I feel that there may be consequences from his exposure to the Dementors that we have not yet contemplated.'

Hermione rolled her eyes and growled. 'For Merlin's sake Severus, stop hiding behind your rather robust vocabulary and just say what you mean.' She snapped.

Severus raised a sardonic eyebrow. 'I think Harry may be slightly unstable.' He said softly but bluntly. Hermione's eyes widened and she shook her head. 'I know you agree with me Hermione.' Severus chided softly. 'We have discussed this very outcome several times over the years. You know what the Dementors do to him.'

'They shouldn't have been that bad. Sirius was innocent and he was there for twelve years. He said they weren't as bad because he knew he was innocent.'

Severus sighed softly. 'And I'm sure that would have been the same for Harry if he actually thought he was too, but you heard him the other day. He believes himself to be responsible. I would quite imagine that between his visions and his nightmares the Dementors had quite the time.'

Hermione shook her head again before nodding and dropping her eyes as they filled with tears. 'I know.' She said softly. 'I just...I just don't want to believe it. He's been through so much, I just want him to have some peace.' Severus could see the dark circles around her eyes, the tired posture and the shaking hands and glanced past her to the blue eyes he knew would be watching, raising an eyebrow in question. Dumbledore nodded in understanding and Snape dropped the silencing charm and stood up, grasping the young woman's arm and helping her to her feet.

'Come on. Albus will look after your classes.' He said softly, guiding her back out of the hall, leaving their breakfasts untouched behind them, as more than a few curious sets of eyes saw a side to the potions master that most had thought was impossible.

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If they thought that was a shock it was lucky no one followed them outside as the minute the doors closed Hermione broke down into sobs as the stress of the last two weeks finally took their toll. Severus pushed her into the small room off the entrance hall before wrapping his arms around her.

'Shhh, it's alright.' The older man murmured soothingly. Snape had gotten to know Hermione extremely well over the last four years and he knew that she had reached the end of her rope. The stress and anxiety to get Harry released as soon as possible, together with the lack of sleep that undoubtedly went with such an endeavor had clearly weighed on the young woman.

He knew she loved the boy. That much was obvious, although he really had no idea why. Severus mentally smacked himself. The habit of putting down the son of James Potter had not yet completely left him, even if it was never done out loud.

He had hoped, after Auror training she would lose her obsession over Potter and settle down with Draco, he knew the Slytherin thought highly of her and on an intellectual level Draco was almost her equal when he actually put the effort into it, but it was to no avail. She loved Potter and always would. He had accidentally overheard her talking to Draco one evening about it. Draco had asked her out, he wanted to

be more than just friends. She had told him that it wouldn't be fair to him. Her heart belonged to Harry and had since she was fifteen. She told him that she cared about him. She loved the way he could always make her smile when she needed to, but that Harry was her other half. That he understood her and she understood him.

Draco had nodded, smiled and backed off. They had talked many times after that, Severus often sitting across the room and able to hear every word. It was almost as if Hermione wanted him to hear about Harry, about the slightly impetuous but always selfless Gryffindor in an effort to erase the ingrained image of the arrogant James Potter from his head. It had worked exceedingly well.

Hermione seemed to have finished crying and was now just sniffling softly. 'I'm sorry Severus. I'm just so tired.'

Severus nodded and, keeping an arm around her shoulders, guided her slowly out of the room and up to Harry's. He gave the password and propelled her through the sitting room to the bathroom, summoning some nightclothes from Hermione's room and telling her to change. He waited out in the bedroom until she came out, watching as Harry tossed gently, obviously not having taken the dreamless sleep before he had dropped off again. He had thought that after the burst of accidental wandless magic in the bathroom it would have exhausted the young man and he was not disappointed.

Hermione came out and it was only then that she realised they were in Harry's room. She blushed brightly but Severus just pushed her towards the bed, pulling the covers over her. 'You both will sleep better with each other.' He stated, gesturing to the still tossing Harry before closing the curtains with a flick of his wand.

'Thank you Severus.' Hermione whispered. The corners of the potions master's lips twitched in that peculiar Snape smile before he stalked to the door.

'Get some rest.' He instructed from the doorway. Hermione nodded and her eyes swept to Harry. She moved over and pulled the agitated figure into her arms.

‘Shh Harry.’ She whispered. ‘You’re safe now. It’s alright. Everything will be alright.’ She promised, Harry’s restless movement stopping almost instantly.

‘Mione.’ Harry whispered breathlessly.

Hermione smiled, kissing him softly. ‘Yes, go back to sleep. I’ll stay with you.’

Harry’s eyes opened slightly and he leaned over to kiss her back. ‘Okay.’ He said tiredly, his arms coming around to hold her tightly. ‘Love you, Mione.’ He whispered as his eyes fell closed once more.

Snape, who stood silently in the doorway, watched as a single tear rolled down the young woman’s cheek. ‘I love you too, Harry.’ She whispered before resting her head on his shoulder and closing her eyes.

Snape sighed softly and shook his head as he closed the door and headed back down to the dungeons. He prayed they had been in time. He didn’t believe that Potter would turn to the dark. No. It was the darkness within him that they had to worry about. That it wouldn’t get so big it would swamp him, leaving nothing but an empty shell behind. He only hoped Hermione could help beat the darkness back. He knew the young man would never be the same but hopefully he could grow with the love of his friend and become the strong, proud young man of four years ago that Severus remembered.

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It was almost ten hours later when Snape sat down to his dinner. The day had been abysmal. There were only three days left of classes and now that exams had finished the students were even more unbearable. He glared once again around the room before turning back to his meal and his silent brooding.

Several minutes later he started slightly as Dumbledore’s fork clattered to his plate. Snape head shot up and his eyes widened as Hermione, leading a very reluctant Harry made their way up to the head table. The entire hall was so silent you could have heard a pin drop from outside the doors. The students all stared as the two came

around the table and Hermione gently pushed Harry down next to Severus and conjured another chair for herself. Harry kept his head down as whispers broke out throughout the hall.

Hermione ignored it all as she began spooning food onto both their plates. 'Eat Harry.' She commanded. Harry snorted softly before obligingly picking up his fork. Severus could hear the whispers throughout the hall but even he wasn't prepared for what happened next. A fairly loud whisper emanated from the Slytherin table.

'Looking at that, I'd say the Dark Lord has already won.'

He felt Harry stiffen and his fork dropped to the table. He could see Hermione's worried gaze as she looked past Harry to meet his eyes.

'Oh yes, I'd say the Dark Lord would be very happy with this turn of events.' Another Slytherin chuckled gleefully.

Harry's head shot up and for the first time in four years the students got a look at his face and the anger that currently flashing in his eyes. His glare at the offending table would have made Severus proud if the potions master hadn't already been shifting nervously away from him at the uncomfortable sensation of righteous anger mixed with magic that was swirling around the young man. It was then, with the grace of a true predator, that Harry stood, never taking his eyes from the Slytherin table as his chair seemingly moving out of his way automatically. All nervousness was gone as with his held his head high and stalked from the hall, his face like thunder and his robes swirling about him as if carried by the wind, the doors slamming shut behind him.

'I don't think old You-Know-Who will be all that happy anymore.' A seventh year Gryffindor said loudly.

The noisy whispering began almost instantly. 'I don't think the wandless magic is going to be a problem for him.' Severus said softly, eyeing the huge oak doors. Hermione turned bright eyes on the older man before smirking.

‘Indeed.’ She sneered in an almost exact replica of the man beside her. Snape snorted softly and they stood, deciding to continue their meal in Harry’s room.

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The next morning the students arrived at breakfast to see Harry Potter sitting once again at the head table. But this time his hair was pulled back into a band at the nape of his neck and his eyes looked boldly out at the students as they stepped into the hall. He seemed almost bigger than the evening before and the rich green robes brought out the sense of strength in his eyes. There was only one word to describe the overall picture.

Powerful.

Even Dumbledore looked slightly shocked to see him sitting there. He had expected Harry to stay hiding in his rooms until the students left two days later. He heard a soft cough beside him and turned to see Severus smirking at him.

‘Good morning Headmaster.’ The potions professor murmured. Albus looked between the dark haired man and Harry, whose eyes had brightened slightly, several times.

‘What on earth did you say to him, Severus?’ he whispered as the two men began walking up the hall. Severus thought back to the conversation the evening before.

Flashback.

‘What the hell was that about, Potter?’ Severus had snarled the moment they walked in. Harry spun from where he was standing in front of the window.

‘What are you talking about?’ He hissed.

‘Why did you run from the hall like a Hufflepuff?’

‘Severus.’ Hermione gasped but Snape ignored her.

‘Come on, Potter. Be a brave Gryffindor and tell me.’

Harry hands clenched into fists and he stalked over so he was face to face with the older man. ‘They were all talking about me. I don’t like it.’ He growled.

Severus sneered. ‘You’re the Boy-Who-Lived. Everyone always talks about you.’ He drawled.

‘They said he had won, that I couldn’t do it. They said that bastard would be happy I was weak.’ Harry spat.

‘So I suppose you think you can do it?’ Snape asked casually.

Harry growled again. ‘Yes.’ He said firmly.

‘And you’re not weak.’ Snape said sardonically and glanced idly at his fingernails as if the conversation was nothing special. Hermione was staring at them in trepidation.

‘No.’ Harry said vehemently. ‘I can do this. I’m strong enough to kill.....’ he trailed off, his anger dissipating suddenly as his eyes became wide. ‘You bastard.’ Harry whispered, but there was no strength behind it. Snape dropped his hand, his tranquil uncaring attitude gone as his black eyes stared intently at the young man in front of him.

‘Yes, I am.’ He said softly, brow raised. ‘But it worked.’

Harry just stared at him before nodding. ‘What do I do now?’ he asked quietly.

‘Now, you have some dinner and go to bed,’ Harry rolled his eyes. ‘But tomorrow, you get up early, dress in some of those nice robes Hermione got for you. Tie that hair back so that everyone can see your face and then you march down to that hall and really show everyone just how strong and capable and powerful we already know you are.’ Severus told him.

Harry’s shoulders straightened slightly but Severus could see the question in his eyes and stepped forward half a step to wrap his arms

around the young man. 'You are correct Harry. You can do this.' He said softly as Harry hugged him tightly back.

Severus could see the tears running down Hermione's face and the look of gratitude that accompanied them and nodded gently.

End Flashback

'Severus?' Albus' voice snapped him back to the present as they had almost reached the head table.

Severus was watching the amusement in Harry's eyes as they got closer. The imprudent brat had probably guessed what they were talking about.

'Sorry Albus but I didn't say anything.' He said, quite untruthfully. He heard Harry stifle a snort as he pulled out the chair and sat down next to him.

'Morning.' Harry said with a grin.

Severus turned slightly so his face was hidden from the students before smiling back. 'Where's Hermione?' he asked.

Harry blushed slightly. 'Oh she's coming. She had to fix something.' He said cryptically. Severus raised an eyebrow but Harry ignored him and buttered some toast. The comment continued to eat at the older man before Hermione finally walked in and sat down, helping herself to some pumpkin juice.

Severus smiled inwardly as he leaned around Harry to say good morning and noticed a mark just below her ear. 'By the way.' He said casually. 'You missed one.'

The effect was instantaneous. Hermione choked slightly, spitting juice all over her plate and Harry burst out laughing. Severus just smirked at the two as Hermione looked mortified and Harry struggled to recover enough to cast a concealing charm over the offending bruise.

Eventually Hermione smacked Harry on the shoulder. 'You did it, you fix it.' She hissed. Harry calmed and cast the spell before turning

back to his breakfast, small snorts of laughter still escaping him from time to time. It was almost as if the students weren't there as Harry, mindless of the whispers that still filled the hall, finished his breakfast before helping Hermione to her feet and they walked arm in arm from the hall.

'He's like a different person.' Minerva said curiously after they left. Severus just smiled mysteriously and headed off to the dungeons for his own classes.

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Two nights later the Bill, Charlie, Fred, George and Draco met up once again in Severus' rooms. Together with said potions master, Harry and Hermione a rather rowdy dinner took place before they all flooed once again to Grimmauld Place. Draco and the Weasleys had been surprised at the change in Harry over the four days. Gone was the timid, nervous boy, replaced by a strong and obviously powerful man. It was almost awe inspiring to say the least.

When asked about how his wandless magic training was going, Harry had just smiled mysteriously. Draco had accidentally on purpose spilt Butterbeer down Harry's robes in the hopes of seeing him clear it up automatically but to his disappointment Harry had just pulled out his wand and murmured a cleaning charm all the while smiling wickedly at the Slytherin.

Draco had spent the rest of the meal in a snit until Harry explained that he would show them when he was ready and not before. Everyone seemed to accept this and the meal continued.

It was only as everyone took a handful of floo powder that the others noticed how tense Harry had become.

'They are all on your side.' Severus murmured softly. Harry nodded and took a deep breath before throwing the powder into the fire and disappearing through the flames.

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‘Good evening Harry.’ Dumbledore said cheerfully. ‘Severus, Draco, Hermione, boys.’ The four Weasleys all rolled their eyes at the greeting. Snape and Draco snorted but Harry stayed silent, his eyes scanning the room fairly quickly but without missing anything. Hermione squeezed his elbow.

‘Good evening Dumbledore.’ Harry said smoothly before moving to sit in the same chair he had last week. ‘I hope I won’t prove to be as much of a distraction this week. I see Voldemort is getting busier.’

Dumbledore shot a small glare at his potions master but Harry caught it and glared back. ‘Severus did not tell me. I can read a newspaper Headmaster.’ He said curtly. ‘even if I didn’t finish my education.’ He couldn’t help adding, smiling inwardly at the look of pride that flickered in the potions master eyes, or the look of sorrow in the headmaster’s. ‘Besides.’ He sighed, leaning back and folding his arms across his chest. ‘Even if I didn’t read about it, I see it every night anyway.’

He watched as Dumbledore did the standard eye flick up to his scar. ‘Every night?’ the old man questioned.

Harry shrugged. ‘Pretty much. I don’t remember sometimes but Mione assures me it’s pretty much every night.’ Draco coughed to cover up his laughter at the sight of the youngest Weasley boy bristling from across the table. Everyone else just looked flabbergasted at the new sense of confidence in the young man. Hermione smirked cruelly at Ron as she linked her arm through Harry’s.

‘Don’t you think we should start Albus?’ she said meaningfully. Dumbledore started and nodded, quickly called the meeting to order.

They went over several new developments, Harry listening quietly but not making any comments or offering any advice. He glanced meaningfully at Draco several times but other than that his face remained expressionless.

It was only as the meeting was called to a close and they all stood to leave that Harry finally spoke.

'Harry.' Ron cut in before the green eyed man could leave. Many waited to see what would happen. 'Please wait. I know you can never forgive me but I just wanted to say that I really am sorry for betraying you.' He said in a rush before Harry could walk out.

Harry stopped and sighed, turning to face the redhead as his hand ran raggedly through his hair. 'Ron,' he said tiredly. 'There really is nothing to forgive because you didn't betray me. You failed me. There is a very big difference.' He said simply before walking swiftly from the room.

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Chapter 5 – Death.

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Draco and the four Weasleys were still snickering as they landed back in the potions master's room. Harry, his hand still clasped in Hermione's turned to face them, his expression pained.

'I really don't think Ron's failure to trust me is something to be laughing about.' He said softly. All five quieted instantly.

'We're sorry, Harry. It weren't laughing at that. It was his expression.' Charlie said sheepishly.

Harry just nodded, again running a hand through his hair. He glanced at the now solemn faces. 'We have a lot to talk about. I don't know if anyone else noticed but Riddle's attacks are starting to fall into a pattern.' He finished glancing at Draco.

‘Yes, I noticed.’ The blond agreed.

‘As did I.’ Severus added. As one the group moved to sit down, Harry casting several strong silencing charms around them. At the others surprised looks, he shrugged.

‘You never know who is listening.’ He said by way of explanation.

Hermione snickered and squeezed his hand. ‘You didn’t use your wand.’ She murmured. Harry’s eyes widened and he glanced down. Sure enough, his hand was empty.

‘Oh bollocks.’ He swore causing the others to start snickering again. Harry looked up and smirked. ‘Yes, well, now you’ve all seen some maybe you can stop hassling me about it.’

‘Maybe.’ George agreed.

‘Or maybe not.’ Fred, Bill and Draco all said at once.

Harry groaned burying his face in his hands. ‘Who the hell did I piss off so badly?’ he mumbled and the others snickered again.

‘Shall we get back to the reason I have a plethora of Gryffindors invading my personal chambers?’ Severus drawled.

‘Hey, I’m not a Gryffindor.’ Draco said indignantly.

Severus snorted. ‘Close enough.’ He muttered. Draco opened his mouth to reply but Harry slapped a hand over it and began to speak.

‘I think a raid might be in order.’ He said quickly, cutting off Draco’s hissy fit before it could start. If there was one thing a Slytherin really didn’t like it was being called a Gryffindor.

‘I agree.’ Severus nodded. ‘We have a pretty good idea that they may be planning an attack on the train. Harry, can you try and slip along that link once more and delve around in the snake’s head for a few more details?’

‘Yes.’

Snape narrowed his eyes. 'Be careful. He can't know you're there.' Harry shook his head.

'He won't.' he said firmly.

'How about we all meet back here tomorrow to discuss it further. I'd suggest taking rooms in the castle tomorrow night so we can all be on the train the next morning.'

'I thought I'd fly.' Harry said nonchalantly, looking down at his hands. 'You know, reconnaissance from up above.'

'You can't fly all the way to London mate.' Charlie scolded.

'No, your bum 'll go numb.' Fred chuckled.

Harry glanced up his eyes sparkling and a mischievous grin on his face. 'Who said I was going to use a broom.' He murmured. Everyone looked curiously at him but he didn't say any more.

Snape groaned and crossed the few steps to smack him upside the head. 'Don't tease.' The potions master scolded. 'Just tell them you're an Animagus?' he growled.

'Animagus?' Draco gaped.

'You're an Animagus?' Bill asked, eyes wide.

'When did that happen?' Even Hermione looked surprised.

Snape laughed. 'You little Slytherin, Potter. You never told a soul, did you?'

Harry kept his face expressionless but his eyes sparkled. 'It was on a need to know basis.' He said simply. 'And no one needed to know.' He added, just as firmly.

Suddenly he gasped as Hermione elbowed him sharply. 'I didn't need to know?' she asked incredulously.

Harry looked at her, his eyes glazing slightly. 'It would only have been one more thing for Tom to torture you for.' He whispered, reaching up to caress her cheek with his fingers.

'Oh.' Hermione smiled in understanding.

Harry's eyes brightened again. 'It wasn't just you. Severus is right. I didn't tell anyone. Even he hasn't seen my true form. I had to protect every one I could. It was a form that Riddle would have no trouble seeing even if others couldn't.'

That comment raised several eyebrows and although no one dared to ask, Harry could see the question in their eyes. He glanced up at Snape who shrugged indifferently.

'Might as well. They're going to see in two days anyway.' The potions master said calmly. Harry's eyes narrowed and his mouth twitched as he stood up.

'Keep trying Severus, I almost believed it.' He snickered, moving to stand in the middle of the room.

'Believed what?' Snape asked innocently.

Harry smirked. 'That you don't want to know just as badly as they do.'

Snape's indignant response was drowned in a chorus of shrieks, gasps and yells as Harry disappeared and in his place stood an enormous thestral.

'Holy mother of Merlin.' Draco swore. The thestral made a whuffling noise that sounded very much as if it was laughing.

And loudly.

Then with a soft pop Harry was back, and indeed, was laughing. 'You should have seen your faces.' He chuckled moving to perch on the arm of the sofa.

Severus and Hermione exchanged worried glances, something that didn't go unnoticed.

'What?' Harry asked, instantly on guard as his mirth dried up. Hermione opened her mouth to speak and shook her head.

'It doesn't matter.' She said quickly. Harry eyes narrowed and he looked between the two, not even noticing the other pale faces around him.

'It obviously does or you wouldn't have looked at Severus like that.' Harry insisted. Hermione looked up at Severus again and Harry stood. 'Tell me.' He growled.

This time it was Severus who spoke. 'Harry, you can tell no one of your form.' he said quietly. 'You can't even be seen changing. You are going to have to be very, very careful. This is bad.'

Harry's chin lifted defiantly. 'Do I even want to know why?' Severus opened his mouth to speak but Harry cut him off again. 'Actually, let me rephrase that. Will your telling me result in my getting upset?'

'Most likely.' Draco muttered.

'Then don't bother.' Harry said curtly. 'I can already guess.'

'Harry, you have to understand.' Hermione began but once more Harry interrupted.

'No Mione, I don't. I don't have to understand anything. I don't have to understand that even now I am not trusted. I don't have to understand that no matter what I say or do, in others eyes, I will always be tainted with darkness and I don't have to understand that my Animagus form, which I have no control over, is, for them, undoubtedly further proof that I will turn dark. It is yet just another reason, in a long line of reasons, why I should be thrown back into Azkaban and forgotten once again.' Harry had been yelling by the time he finished his rant. He was standing in the middle of the room, his hair almost standing on end as his eyes burned an angry green, his hands clenched and unclenched into fists and waves of righteous indignation flowed off him.

'I don't have to understand anything.' He whispered again, spinning on his heel and bolting from the room.

'Oh shit.' Draco muttered. Hermione just shook her head and moved to go but Severus caught her arm.

'Let me. He will understand it better from me.' He said gently. Hermione sighed and nodded.

'We'll be in my rooms.' She told him and Snape nodded once before sweeping out the door.

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Harry stood at the edge of the parapet. There were no Astronomy classes that night as the clouds hid the stars and the moon's light was muted.

'Why?' Harry asked plaintively, looking skywards. 'Why are you doing this to me? What did I ever do to deserve this life?' Silence was his answer and his tear filled eyes lowered and looked out over the grounds.

The expressions on the faces of the others had told Harry everything he needed to know. They may have believed in him enough to get him out of Azkaban but they still didn't trust that he wouldn't go dark. No matter which way he thought about it, it didn't change and it felt like his heart had been cut out. There was no one who trusted him completely, even Hermione thought he would let the past turn him from the future. He'd rather die than end up like Tom Riddle.

He glanced downwards to the ground. 'So far away.' He murmured softly. It would be so easy, he thought idly, lifting a foot and dangling it out in the air. You would be free, a voice in his head whispered. Harry smiled and pushed forward with his other foot.

The freedom of the movement captured him immediately but didn't last long. One minute he was dropping and the next he found his momentum brought to an abrupt halt and himself suspended in mid air before being floated back up and onto the tower floor and directly into the presence of a practically apoplectic potions master who immediately bound and gagged him.

Harry's eyes burned darkly as the older man looked down at him.

‘How dare you?’ Snape hissed before casting a levitating charm and floating Harry’s body back out of the room and down the stairs.

CC

By the time Severus floated Harry’s bound form into Hermione’s rooms Harry had geared up for an eruption of Vesuvial proportions. He didn’t even notice Hermione and Draco sitting by the fireplace, the Weasley’s having left already. The palpable anger that wafted in when they did surprised the other two and they wondered what had not only got Harry so angry but Severus himself. They were soon to find out.

Snape lowered Harry to the floor after closing the door behind him and placing several locking spells. The moment he released the bindings Harry leapt to his feet, a glare of previously unparalleled magnitude gracing his features as he snarled at the other man.

‘How dare I?’ Harry hissed dangerously, taking several predatory steps forward, both hands raised. ‘How dare you.’

‘You have no right after everything that has happened.’ Snape snapped back, trying not to show just how much Harry’s display was affecting him.

‘I have every right. It’s my bloody life.’ Harry spat, his eyes narrowing.

Severus swallowed. ‘No. it’s not. You have a responsibility.’

That was it and Harry exploded. ‘I DON’T WANT THE FUCKING RESPONSIBILITY.’ He bellowed. ‘GIVE IT TO SOMEONE WHO ACTUALLY CARES, GODDAMN IT.’ Hermione and Draco watched wide eyed as Harry and Snape continued to yell at each other.

‘IT CAN’T BE GIVEN TO SOMEONE ELSE. YOU KNOW THAT AND YET YOU STILL DID IT.’ Snape growled loudly.

‘YEAH AND I’DVE BEEN ABLE TO FINISH IT TOO IF YOU HADN’T STUCK YOUR BLOODY BIG NOSE IN.’ Harry bellowed in reply.

‘I COULDN’T LET YOU.’

‘YOU COULDN’T LET ME.’ Harry yelled incredulously. ‘IT’S MY FUCKING LIFE, WHY WON’T YOU LISTEN. IF I WANT TO JUMP OFF THE BLOODY ASTRONOMY TOWER THEN IT’S MY CHOICE. YOU DON’T GET A SAY IN IT.’

Hermione gave a horrified gasp and Snape looked at Harry calculatngly as Harry glared back at him. Both were panting at the exertion of yelling so angrily at each other. This time when Snape spoke it was softer.

‘So you would quite happily kill yourself and leave everyone else to die at Tom’s hand?’ he asked.

Harry’s glare mellowed and he blinked as his eyes filled with tears. ‘I’ve been dead at Tom’s hand for years.’ He said hoarsely before his knees buckled and he dropped to the floor like a stone.

Hermione was at his side instantly, wrapping her arms around him as he sobbed. The two Slytherins didn’t move as Hermione help Harry to his feet and pushed him into the bedroom, pulling the covers back and gently urging him into the bed. She unclasped his robes and took his shoes off before placing a vial of Dreamless Sleep in his hand and waiting for him to swallow it.

Only when she was sure he had drifted off did she return to the sitting room, closing the door behind her. She looked up and looked between the two men and sighed, a single tear dripping down her cheek.

‘I think we may be too late.’ She whispered.

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Chapter 6 – Ordinary Concepts

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‘I think we may be too late.’ She whispered.

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‘You can’t say that, Hermione.’ Draco said quietly.

Hermione walked over to the side table and poured herself a large glass of Fire Whiskey. ‘Did you hear the same argument I did, Draco.’ She asked sarcastically, taking a big swallow and coughing madly.

‘You still can’t say that.’

Hermione spun to face the Slytherin. ‘What part of, if I want to throw myself off the Astronomy tower, did you not hear?’ she spat. ‘He tried to kill himself. We are too late. The darkness from the inside will take him long before the darkness from outside ever could.’

‘Hermione, don’t please.’ Severus said quietly. The potions master looked even more upset then the day Harry had been arrested.

'Don't?' Hermione continued, heedless of the older man's plea. 'Don't? How can you be so calm?'

'MISS GRANGER.' Severus bellowed and the bust of Godric Gryffindor that was sitting on the mantle shattered into thousands of tiny pieces. Hermione's eyes widened. Severus hadn't used her last name in almost four years.

'Severus?' she asked hesitantly.

Snape reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose and sighed. 'I'm sorry.' He whispered before hurriedly pulling down the locking spells and vanishing out the door.

'I told you, you shouldn't have said that.' Draco scolded quietly.

Hermione sighed and sank down into the sofa beside the fire. 'I...I...Can you imagine if Severus hadn't found him in time.' She finally said.

Draco sat down beside her and laid a comforting arm on her shoulder. 'Well he did. That's all that matters.'

Hermione snorted. 'I never would have taken you for such an optimist, Draco.' She muttered.

Draco grinned, gently running his fingers through her hair. 'I had to be, otherwise I might have ended up in almost the exact place Harry was half an hour ago.'

'There but for the grace of God.' Hermione murmured.

'What?'

'Muggle saying.'

'Riiight.' Draco said skeptically. 'Back to something that has been bugging me. Why exactly did you all react the way you did at Harry's Animagus form? I mean, I could tell you were horrified, all of you, and I knew if you said anything it would upset him, but why? It's just a Thestral. They pull the carriages here for Merlin's sake.'

Hermione looked curiously at him before it dawned on her. 'You were brought up in a family that encouraged the Dark Arts. Thestrals would probably seem lucky to you.'

Draco shrugged. 'Well, not lucky, but there definitely isn't anything wrong with them. Besides, Severus was brought up that way too.'

'Yes, but he has been a spy for the light for so long, he knows what everyone else thinks about things like that.'

'So what do they think, about Thestrals I mean?'

Hermione sighed, frowning slightly as if drawing on information stored long ago. 'Thestrals are the most elusive, and least horse-like, breed of magical horse. They are invisible to all who haven't 'seen death', which requires not only witnessing a death, but having the event sink in. For those who have, their skeletal appearance is no less morbid. They have an understandable but undeserved reputation as evil omens.'

'You sound like a book.' Draco chuckled.

Hermione glared at him with a withering glare she had somehow adopted after four years in close contact with a certain potions master. 'I was just telling you how Thestrals are perceived by most of the wizarding world. Can you imagine if it got out that the Animagus form of the Boy-Who-Lived is one people associate as an evil omen?' Hermione said incredulously. 'I can see the headlines now. Riddle would be the least of our problems. We would have a lynching mob outside the gates wanting Harry back in that awful place before sundown.'

'People can't possibly be that narrow minded.' Draco insisted.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. 'Are you sure you were at school with Harry?' she asked mockingly. 'Or was the memory of having yourself bounced by Moody so bad, you blocked the entire seven years out.'

'Hermione.' Draco said warningly. Hermione just smirked.

'Well, what about when they found out Harry could speak Parseltongue? Or during fifth year when they all thought he was mentally unstable because he said Voldemort was back. People believe what ever they want. They will believe whatever fits in with their idea of their nicely organized world and his Animagus form combined with those things and the fact that he was in Azkaban for four years, even though he was innocent, will only make people scared of him again. And when they're scared, a mob mentality will rule and we won't be able to do anything to stop it.'

Draco paled slightly. 'They wouldn't hurt him, would they?'

'Would you care?' she retorted.

The blond Slytherin's eyes narrowed. 'That wasn't fair, Hermione.' He said harshly.

Hermione's eyes lowered and she fiddled with the hem on her sleeve. 'I'm sorry Draco.' She said softly. 'I don't know what's wrong with me tonight.'

Draco sighed, shifting closer and wrapping his arms around her as tears trickled down her cheeks. 'Shhh, it's alright.' He said softly. He really hated being this close to Hermione. Even if she didn't love him, he still loved her and feeling her in his arms and having her perfume tickle his nostrils was hard. Draco gently rubbed her back until she pulled slightly away and looked up at him with a tearful smile.

'Thank you.' She whispered. Draco's breath caught in his throat as he looked into the sparkling brown eyes. He didn't know what came over him and he would berate himself for it afterwards but at that moment he couldn't stop himself as he leaned down and kissed her, pouring every ounce of passion he had into it.

The glass Hermione had been drinking out of exploded, startling Hermione out of her daze and causing her to pull violently away. It was at that moment Draco noticed Harry standing in the doorway to the bedroom looking for all like he would enjoy tearing the other man limb from limb. His fists were so tightly clenched Draco thought he could see blood dripping from in between the fingers. Harry's eyes

burned angrily, his jaw so rigid you could practically hear the teeth cracking under the strain. His entire body screamed tension.

'Harry, it's not what you think.' Draco said hurriedly. Hermione whipped around, the blood draining from her face.

'Oh , so you weren't kissing my girlfriend, Malfoy.' Harry snarled.

'Harry, please. He didn't mean it. It was a mistake.' Hermione insisted.

Harry's eyes narrowed, making him look, if anything, even more menacing. 'Oh, it was a mistake alright.' He growled.

'I'm sorry Harry. I don't know what came over me.' Draco pleaded softly. Harry eyes glinted threateningly.

'Funny. I could say the same about me.'

'What?'

'Extregero.' Harry hissed.

Hermione screamed as Draco flew backwards, toppling over the end of the armchair and thudding into the wall with a sickening crunch.

'Harry, no.' Hermione cried, rushing to hold him back as Harry stalked across the room like a predator on a hunt.

'Don't touch me.' He hissed as he closed in on his prey and stopped, leaning over so Draco, who was moaning softly, could hear him. 'How dare you take what's mine.' He snarled.

'Petrificus Totalis.' Hermione cried and Harry slumped to the floor beside the Slytherin. The young woman stormed over to peer down at the man she loved.

'I don't belong to you, Harry. I'm not a possession. I am a human being not a house elf.' She said. 'I love you but I refuse to be treated like that.' Harry's green eyes widened, his anger forgotten.

'And you,' Hermione continued, her eyes flicking to Draco. 'Don't you ever do that again. I've told you before that I don't love you like that.'

Her piece said, she released Harry and turned sharply on her heel, storming into the bedroom and slamming the door behind her.

‘Oh crap.’ Draco muttered, wincing as he sat up. Harry was still silent, looking at the closed bedroom door with a pained expression.

‘Mione.’ He whispered softly.

Draco looked at the other man, knowing this was going to hurt him more than anything else ever had. ‘Go to her, Harry.’ He said softly.

Harry tore his eyes away from the door to look curiously, if not a little angrily, at the Slytherin. ‘Why?’ Draco knew the question didn’t relate to what he just said.

Draco swallowed and ducked his head. ‘I love her.’ He said huskily. ‘I have for years but her heart belongs to you and always will.’

Draco glanced up again and Harry’s heart skipped a beat at the pain mingled with longing in the grey eyes.

‘I’m sorry.’ Harry whispered, feeling a wash of guilt flood through him.

Draco smiled wanly. ‘It isn’t your fault.’ He sighed. ‘But make sure you look after her. She loves you so much. I think she would have given her soul to get you out of there. Don’t make her regret all the effort.’

‘I won’t.’ Harry said firmly.

Draco smiled again and with a grimace picked himself off the ground, Harry moving to help him. The two men stood facing the other. ‘Just let go, Harry. Tell her exactly how you feel.’ Draco said softly, placing a hand on the smaller man’s shoulder and squeezing gently. ‘After all she has done, it’s the least she deserves.’

Harry nodded. ‘Thanks, Draco.’ He whispered. Draco smiled again and walked slowly to the door, stopping and turning as he opened it.

‘Remember Harry, nothing but the truth.’ He said before shutting the door and leaving Harry standing alone in the sitting room.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, several images flashing through his mind before he opened them and walked swiftly towards the bedroom door.

Another deep breath and a knock before opening it. 'Mione?' he said softly.

Hermione was standing by the window, her head buried in her hands, her shoulders shaking. Harry moved to stand behind her, reaching to touch her but holding back at the last moment.

'Mione, I'm sorry. I don't know quite what happened. I saw him kissing you and I just saw red. I thought I had lost you, like I lose everyone else. I love you so much, Mione. I don't want to spend a day without you. My heart lifts every morning when I open my eyes and see you beside me, I want to wake up like that every day for the rest of my life. You are my other half and I couldn't stand the thought of losing you. Please, Mione, say something.' Harry implored, finally finishing his rambling speech.

Hermione lifted her head and turned to face him, Harry's heart breaking at the tear stained face.

'Oh, Mione.' Harry began but Hermione leaned forward and kissed him gently.

'Hush idiot. You had me at, I'm sorry.' She whispered, leaning forward again and kissing him once more.

Harry wrapped his arms around her tightly as if he never wanted to let her go. He poured every ounce of love and passion he had into it and his heart lifted once again as he felt Hermione's forgiveness flood through him.

'I love you, Harry.' She whispered. Harry smiled and lifted her in his arms and carried her over to the bed.

'I love you too, Mione and I'm going to show you just how much.'

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Many hours later Harry held her close, one arm protectively around her as the other gently traced the shell of her ear. Every so often he leant down to place several kisses on her face.

Hermione's brown eyes were locked on his own and Harry didn't even need to speak, she knew exactly how he felt.

'You do realise that once this is over we can leave the wizarding world forever, don't you?' she asked softly.

'I don't care as long as you're with me.'

Hermione's brow furrowed. 'That reminds me.' She said curiously. 'Did you ask me what I think you asked me before? In the painfully shy way you normally ask things of that magnitude, of course?'

Harry dropped his eyes and blushed hotly. 'I didn't mean to, sorry. Draco just told me to be honest and that was honestly what I felt.'

'Oh.'

Harry could hear the disappointment in that single word. 'No, I mean I did mean it, just not like that. I always thought I would do the whole magic moment, on one knee thing when I asked you. You know, the whole proposal concept, I just guess my execution could do with a little work.'

'You always thought? How long have you been thinking about it?'

'Awhile.' Was all Harry would say and Hermione could see his mind beginning to tick over in the way no one else's did. She decided not to push it any further, knowing that Harry would bring it up again when he was ready.

'We should get up. Breakfast will be ready soon.' She said finally.

Harry nodded distantly and Hermione smiled, knowing the time would come when he would in fact, execute, the whole proposal concept as he put it.

Slowly they showered and changed, Harry silent almost the whole time. In fact, he was still in the shower when Hermione left, singing out that she would see him in the great hall.

Harry had just nodded again and let her go.

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'How is he?' Severus asked as Hermione sat down for breakfast.

'He's a lot better, thank you.' She said honestly, turning to the older man. 'Severus, I'm sorry about last night. I just....I was scared. When I'm scared I tend to run off at the mouth.'

Severus mouth gave an amused twitch and he raised an eyebrow. 'Really? I never would have guessed.' He drawled.

Hermione smacked him and reached for her pumpkin juice.

'So have you spoken to Draco this morning?' Severus asked lightly.

Hermione choked and spat pumpkin juice all over the table. 'What?'

Severus snorted.

'He told you?'

Snape nodded. 'Yes. He was absolutely mortified. He honestly thought Harry was going to kill him.'

Hermione sighed. 'No. Harry would never have done that. He may have ended up walking funny, and with a rather high pitched voice but he wouldn't have killed him.'

'I did tell him that.'

Hermione fiddled with her eggs as she hesitated before asking the next question. 'Did he say why he did it?'

Severus shrugged slightly. 'He loves you, Hermione. Isn't that reason enough?'

‘Not really. Not when he knows I love Harry.’

The potions master sighed and placed his knife and fork together. ‘Sometimes your heart will lead you places your head wouldn’t normally go.’ He said cryptically.

Hermione pushed the eggs around a bit more before dropping her fork and pushing her plate away. ‘Maybe.’ She said vaguely.

It was at that point that Harry swept into the hall, a spring in his step and a determined glint in his eye. Powerful Harry was back with a vengeance and the murmured conversations quieted as he walked swiftly up the centre aisle, his striking green robes billowing behind him.

‘His mood swings are quite remarkable.’ Severus observed.

‘If not a little disturbing.’ Hermione added, smiling as Harry swept around the table and planted a kiss on her temple. He then turned to Severus his eyes dropping to the floor.

‘I’m sorry for last night. It was stupid and you were right. Even if I don’t have a responsibility to the wizarding world at large, I do have one to those who always believed in me. It won’t happen again, I swear it.’ He said softly.

Severus was stunned and it took several moments before he could respond. He stood, ignoring the curious glances from not only the students but the other staff as well, and placed his hand under Harry’s chin lifting it so he could see the sorrow filled green eyes.

‘I do understand why.’ Severus whispered. ‘I’m just glad someone was there to stop you, to give you a chance to think more carefully, as once you decide to take that step there is no turning back.’

Harry smiled tightly and lowered his voice. ‘I bet years ago when you swore to carry on the life debt to protect me, you didn’t think it would be from myself.’ He murmured.

Snape dropped the hand until it rested on Harry’s shoulder. ‘Actually I did.’ Severus said softly. ‘Your life, at least the beginning of it, has not

been all that dissimilar from mine. It was the only the form of imprisonment that differed.' Carefully, so that only Harry and Hermione could see, Severus rolled up the left sleeve of his robe and bared his forearm. Harry breath caught as he saw the Dark Mark glaring back at him, surrounded by a multitude of pale scars, some that at their initial cutting would have been extremely deep.

Harry's green eyes shot up to see black one's looking at him with a combination of understanding and shame. Harry reached out and covered the forearm with his hand, feeling the slight heat emanating from the Dark Mark before rolling down the sleeve.

'One with the freedom to be who he is but with no liberty, or one with many liberties except the freedom to be who he really is.' Harry said softly. 'Which is worse, I wonder?'

Snape placed his other hand over Harry's. 'I guess we will never know.'

'It probably doesn't really matter.' Hermione added quietly. 'All I know is that you two should really sit down before everyone dies of curiosity.'

It was at that point that Harry and Severus finally glanced around them and noticed the occupants of the hall were still staring at them, including the headmaster who, surprisingly, had an indecipherable expression on his face.

Harry blushed and Severus glared and both men quickly took their seats. It took several minutes for the conversation to start up again and shortly thereafter Severus stood, promising to see them later and stalking from the hall, a scowl etched firmly on his face.

Hermione flashed a grin at Harry and rose too. 'Will I see you later?'

Harry nodded. 'Yep, I thought I'd take a trip to Diagon Alley, see if I can get a few more books on wandless magic.' He explained, buttering a slice of toast. 'and I need a few more sets of robes, so I'll probably see you at dinner.'

'That sounds good.' She said firmly, pleased to see Harry was feeling confident enough to venture out of the castle, and leaned over to kiss him softly. Harry grinned and watched as she walked out of the great hall before turning back to his food.

‘Everything alright there, young Harry?’ Dumbledore’s question immediately quashing the smile on Harry’s face.

'Fine.' Harry said curtly.

'You seem to be in quite the cheerful mood this morning.'

‘Quite.’ Harry continued to eat, doing his best to ignore the piercing gaze from his left.

'Was everything alright after your return from Grimmauld Place last night?'

Harry's head shot up and he fixed cold grey eyes on the headmaster as he stood. 'Stop with the questions, Albus. I haven't signed on to your little fishing expedition and furthermore, want no part of it. If I think you need to know something I'll tell you, otherwise, mind your own business.' His small rant finished he snagged an apple off the table and walked swiftly, if a little menacingly, from the hall.

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Harry spent the day in Diagon Alley picking up a couple of books, a few pairs of robes and several other things he needed before finally returning to Hogwarts in time for dinner. It was still light as he headed down to the forest for the final piece of his plan.

The sun had just disappeared over the horizon as thankfully as summer was almost upon them. Tonight was the leaving feast and Harry was going to make it one to remember. He wondered if the Weasleys had made it the castle yet. He chuckled softly at the thought of their faces.

Glancing quickly at his watch he hurried his pace, he didn't have much time.

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Hermione looked out the large entrance doors for any sign of Harry walking up from Hogsmeade but there was nothing. While she knew he could look after himself, part of her worried almost incessantly that she would loose him one day.

Sighing she closed the door and crossed to the great hall and walked in. She smiled taking in the red and gold banners showing that once again, Gryffindor had won the house cup. She walked slowly up the center aisle, smiling at the students that waved to her and wished her a good summer. She saw Fred, George, Bill and Charlie all sitting together at the end of the Gryffindor table and grinned at them. It was then she noticed Draco glancing at her nervously from the head table and she sighed. This conversation was going to be hard.

She walked up the few steps onto the platform the head table stood on, but before she could walk around it the enchanted ceiling above them darkened and all the excited chatter ceased as everyone, students and teachers alike looked upwards.

‘Professor Granger, look.’ A fourth year Ravenclaw yelled, pointing at the ceiling. Hermione glanced up and tears filled her eyes. There, the stars that filled the enchanted sky had rearranged themselves to spell out five little words.

I love you Hermione Granger

A sharp clapping noise rang out and suddenly the doors burst open as a stunning white Unicorn galloped towards her, stopping just in front of her.

‘Look.’ Several students were pointing up again and Hermione looked to see the stars arrange themselves once more.

Marry me

It was then she noticed the unicorn had dropped one front leg back and into a bow and lowered its head. There, perched on the tip of its horn was a beautifully engraved band holding the biggest diamond Hermione had seen in her entire life.

'Oh my god.' Hermione breathed. The unicorn whickered softly in encouragement and Hermione tentatively reached out and plucked the ring off the horn. As soon as she had it in her hand the unicorn stood and wheeled on its haunches and galloped out of the hall. Hermione only noticing Harry standing halfway down the aisle as the animal slowed to whicker softly to him as it passed. Harry seemed to almost whicker back but his eyes never left Hermione's.

Hermione was frozen to the spot and the hall was deathly silent as Harry slowly walked up the aisle until he reached the platform. Very quietly he knelt down on one knee and looked up at her imploringly.

'Will you?' he asked softly.

Tears streaked down Hermione's cheeks as she nodded. 'For such a well executed proposal concept, how could I say no?' She said, a mischievous sparkle in her tear filled eyes. Harry face broke into an enormous grin and he stood just in time for Hermione to fly down the steps and into his arms. The stars above them flared and exploded like fireworks.

'I love you, Harry.' She whispered in his ear as he hugged her tightly and the hall erupted in cheers. Harry pulled back and kissed her passionately. Not even noticing as the Weasley's began wolf whistling, only pulling away when Severus reached them.

'Let me.' Harry said softly, taking the ring and placing it carefully on her finger.

'It's beautiful, Harry.' Hermione breathed.

'It certainly is.' Severus agreed, his mouth curling up into almost a smile. Harry glanced around them, snorting at the looks of horror on the students nearby. Fred, George, Bill and Charlie joined them and grabbed them one at a time, hugging them tightly, the twins practically dancing a jig in excitement. The rest of the staff and even some of the nearby students added their congratulations. Hermione was showing Minerva, Poppy and Pomona her ring as Harry noticed Draco standing nearby, looking lost.

He gently shouldered his way through the well wishers to stand in front of the blond Slytherin. 'Draco.' He said tentatively.

Draco started as if he hadn't even noticed Harry come up to him. 'Congratulations, Harry.' He said hoarsely. Harry glanced back at Hermione, who was being hugged again by both Fred and George.

'I'm sorry Draco.' He said sincerely.

Draco shook his head. 'No Harry. This is the way it is supposed to be.'

'I just wish it wasn't so hard for you.'

Draco glanced over at Hermione. 'Look after her, Harry. Look after yourself too. I don't know what she would do if anything happened to you.'

'I will.' He promised. Harry looked carefully at the Slytherin for several minutes. 'Draco,' he began. 'Would you, I mean you don't have to, I would understand if it was too hard, I don't want you to feel uncomfortable or anything.'

'Harry, you're babbling.' Draco raised an amused eyebrow. 'Just spit it out.'

Harry blushed and ducked his head before raising it to look pleadingly at the man in front of him. 'I was wondering if you would stand with me, as one of my witnesses.'

That wasn't quite what Draco had expected and it took a few moments to reign in his shock and pull the mask of indifference back down over his face.

Harry took his silence the wrong way and immediately began back pedaling. 'I'm sorry, Draco. I didn't mean to upset you. You've just done so much for me. I don't have many friends, I can almost count them on one hand and I really wanted you to share the day with me. I'm really sorry. I know this is very hard for you.'

‘Harry, you’re babbling again.’ Draco interrupted him once more, an amused smile on his face. ‘Are you under the impression I’m upset with you?’

‘Well...’ Harry trailed off.

Draco let out a snort. ‘Harry, I was just shocked. I can’t say I’m not upset but I love Hermione and I want her to be happy. You make her happy, when you’re not being a prat anyway, and I know you love her very much. I’d be honoured to stand with you.’

Harry eyes widened and his face broke out into an enormous grin. ‘Really?’

Draco nodded.

‘Thank you.’ Harry whispered. ‘Thank you so much.’ Draco could see the look in Harry’s eyes and knew the other man was unsure so he stepped forward and hugged him tightly.

‘Congratulations Harry. May your life be full of love, fun and laughter.’ He said sincerely before pulling away.

‘I’d just be happy with length at the moment.’ Harry chuckled and Draco laughed.

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‘Oh thank goodness.’ Hermione whispered as she caught Harry and Draco together over Severus shoulder. The potions master saw the tears forming in her eyes and turned just in time to see the two men pulling away, Harry saying something that caused Draco to laugh.

He felt Hermione put her hand on his arm and guide him over to where Harry and Draco were standing.

‘Congratulations.’ Draco murmured sheepishly as soon as he noticed them. Hermione smiled and leaned forward to hug her friend.

‘Thank you, Draco.’ She said softly.

Harry wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist and grinned. 'Draco has agreed to stand for us.' He told her. Hermione's eyebrows shot skywards and she looked at the blonde once again.

'Really?'

Draco nodded and shrugged. 'I want you to be happy, Hermione. Both of you.' Tears filled Hermione's eyes once again as she darted out of Harry's arms to hug Draco once more. Harry glanced at Severus who was watching them silently.

'Professor?' he said softly. 'Severus, would you be my other witness?'

Snape didn't look nearly as shocked as Draco and the edges of his mouth twitched in that peculiar Snape way before he replied. 'Are you sure, Harry?'

Harry nodded. 'Yes. You've always believed in me, Sir, even when you didn't like me. You kept your promise to a man who hated you and who you hated in return, and you saved me many times over. I can think of no one I would trust more to stand with me.'

The mouth twitched again and the eyes were suspiciously bright but Snape nodded in acquiescence. 'As long as you're sure.'

'Never been surer of anything in my life.'

Snape smirked. 'With the non stop drama that comprises your life I don't disbelieve that whatsoever.' He snorted softly. Harry laughed when Hermione, having heard their conversation, jumped forward and hugged the potions master, to the absolute horror of those around them, not to mention the man himself.

'Professor Granger, unhand me this instant.' Severus growled, glaring menacingly. Hermione pulled away, giggling unmercifully.

'Don't be so sour, Severus.' She chided softly as those around them snickered.

Snape's glare became even darker. 'While I congratulate both you and Mr Potter on your engagement I see no reason for you to throw yourself upon my person without my consent.'

'Oh Severus, stop being so ridiculous.' Hermione giggled stepping towards him as Harry stifled a chuckle with his hand.

Snape growled and stepped back. 'Miss Granger, could you please desist immediately.'

Harry laughed out loud and Snape rolled his eyes, grabbing both their arms and bundling them through the crowd and into the small room off the great hall.

'Ooops, now they're in for it.' They heard Draco cackle before the door slammed shut. Harry and Hermione exchanged amused but slightly wary glances, unsure of the older man's current state of mind.

'Severus, I'm sorry for teasing you.' Hermione began. 'I was just so happy that you said yes. I didn't.'

Snape held up his hand, silencing her instantly. 'For once Miss Granger, can you shut that mouth of yours before it gets you into any further strife.' He said calmly, turning to face them so they could see the happiness shining in his eyes.

'I'm happy for you both.' He whispered before stepping forward and wrapping his arms around them. 'However if you do insist on procreating immediately I'm handing in my resignation now. I don't think I could cope with an eleven year old of a Potter's cunning and a Granger's brains.'

Harry and Hermione laughed and pulled away. 'Don't worry, we have several tasks that must be finished before we get to that.' Hermione insisted.

Harry nodded, wrapping his arms around her waist. 'Yes, No child of mine will grow up while this state of war continues.' He agreed. The three exchanged glances.

'It will end soon.' Severus said firmly.

‘Yes. It will.’ Harry’s voice was just as strong.

Snape hugged them once more and after morphing his face into its usual scowl he winked at the two and stalked from the room.

Harry could hear Dumbledore calling for everyone to sit down so that the feast could begin and turned to see Hermione looking up at him. 'So,' he said casually. 'As far as proposal concepts go, was it okay?'

Hermione snickered. 'Well,' she said slowly. 'I don't actually have that much experience in them, never having been asked before, of course.'

'Oh, of course.' Harry smiled.

'But personally, for my taste, I thought it was absolutely unbelievable.'

Harry's grin got wider. 'Oh good. I'd have hated for it to have been ordinary.' He whispered, leaning down to capture her lips once more.

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Chapter 7 – Friends and Foes

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That evening passed in a haze of bliss for Harry and Hermione and when they finally tumbled into bed after what seemed like a hundred toasts to both of them, most of which had been instigated by the Weasley twins who had also been responsible for the impromptu party their closest and in Harry's case, only true friends had in their rooms, they barely even managed to get their arms around each other before their eyes closed.

'Mione?' Harry murmured after a moment.

'Mmmm.'

'Do you think your parents will be upset?'

Hermione's eyes snapped back open instantly at the guilt laden question. She tilted her head up until she could see Harry's eyes, knowing he too would have opened them. 'They never believed it, Harry. They never believed you could have done that.'

'But they barely knew me.'

'And yet they still believed in you.'

‘Because you did.’

Hermione nodded. ‘Yes, because they trust me.’

‘And you’re never wrong.’ Harry murmured.

Hermione smirked before placing a chaste kiss on his cheek. ‘Glad you’ve learnt that early. I’d hate to have re-train you at this late stage.’

Harry laughed and pulled her close. ‘Love you, Mione.’

‘Me too.’ She whispered back before snuggling into his chest and drifting off to sleep.

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Breakfast the next morning was a rowdy affair at least among the students and part of the faculty. Harry, Severus and the others all sat almost in silence, exchanging the occasional whisper until the students finally let to collect their trunks. It was at this point that Harry stood and turned to Dumbledore.

‘We will be accompanying the train.’ He said curtly.

‘Now, Harry. I really don’t think that’s necessary. I don’t believe he’d attack the Express. Not with all the charms and wards on it anyway.’

‘You’ve got to be kidding?’ Draco hissed incredulously.

Harry stayed any further protest with a hand on the Slytherin’s arm. ‘We will be accompanying the train. The students need protection.’ He said again, the tone broking no argument.

Dumbledore eyed him carefully but calculatingly. ‘Do you really believe he will strike?’ he questioned.

Harry’s green eyes hardened. ‘I have no doubt.’ He said quietly.

The blue eyes swept his form once more before nodding. ‘I will call for the rest of the Order.’

Harry's mouth twitched into what on anyone else may have been a smile before nodding. 'Thank you.' He said softly before turning and walking swiftly from the hall.

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Twenty minutes later Harry and the others swept into the headmaster's office to find most of the Order waiting for them. As soon as they closed the door behind them Dumbledore began to speak.

'There is a very real threat that Voldemort will attack the train.' He said loudly.

'Where did this information come from?' Kingsley Shacklebolt looked around the room.

Dumbledore glanced at Harry.

'From me.' Harry said quietly.

‘How can you be sure?’ Moody growled. ‘What if we place all our assets on the train and he strikes elsewhere?’

Harry didn't answer instead raising one hand to rub gently at the pink scar on his forehead.

'You've been tricked before, Potter.' The ex Auror growled again.

Harry glanced back at Dumbledore and shook his head. 'This was a mistake. I'll deal with it myself.' He said softly, spinning on his heel and almost running from the room.

'Brilliant show of faith.' Hermione snarled before darting out after him.

Snape turned fiery eyes on the members of the Order. 'We figured out about the attack on the Express long before Harry confirmed it through his link to the Dark Lord. Once again however you have shown your ignorance. Potter has never been wrong about the Dark Lord before. He knew something was wrong as far back as in his first

year when the Philosophers Stone was at risk and all he has done for the last four is watch each and every attack the Dark Lord commanded. That young man knows more about how he thinks than anyone and if he says the Dark Lord will attack, you can be assured he will. Your lack of trust in him, especially after all that has happened, is unwarranted, unjustifiable and totally unfounded. Mark my words, if you continue on this path, it will be our downfall.' Snape's black eyes practically glowed as he spat the last words before storming from the room, Hermione, Draco and the elder Weasleys quickly following.

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Harry walked swiftly through the corridors of the school, ignoring the still stunned looks of both fear and awe on the faces of the students who had mingled in the entrance hall while waiting for the carriages.

He slipped out the doors to the castle and crossed towards Hagrid's hut. He waited to see Snape and the others follow him and after they too stepped out he held up his hand in signal. After seeing the nod from Snape he disappeared into the forest.

Treading stealthily through the undergrowth he circled around to where the few Thestrals that were not pulling the carriages were standing. With a glance around him and a soft pop he transformed, whickering gently to the stallion of the herd.

The stallion bobbed his head up and down several times and Harry changed back to human form and leapt up onto the creature's back, leaning forward and grabbing the diaphanous mane and hanging on as the stallion took to the sky. He could have flown all the way to London but that would have taken a lot of energy, energy he had suddenly had the feeling he may be in need of. This way also had the added bonus of not revealing his Animagus form to anyone. Before the thestral cleared the tops of the trees Harry cast a disillusionment charm on himself. He knew that Hermione and the others would think the thestral was him but that was fine. As long as they thought they could see him they wouldn't worry.

Well, not as much.

Harry urged the thestral closer but within moments Death Eaters apparated in and all sprinted towards the train. Harry sent stunning spells, his wand held tightly in his hand. He watched as Snape and the others, including the members of the Order and even some of the upper year students all swarmed from the train towards them.

He continued stunning as many Death Eaters as he could but it wasn't long before he was spotted in spite of the charm and he quickly sent the thestral downwards where it landed, teeth bared, scattering the Death Eaters. Sending spells left and right he ducked and weaved his way over towards Hermione; almost stumbling to his knees when he came face to face with...himself.

'What?' he stammered before finding himself thrown to the ground as the other him pushed him out of the way of a curse and downed the Death Eater with the killing curse without even blinking.

'There's bloody two of them.' One of the masked figures yelled as Harry leapt to his feet again and sent another two stunning spells at them.

'The one throwing the killing curse, the other must be a ring in.' Another shouted back and to Harry's horror a third Death Eater threw himself at the second Harry and they disappeared with a pop, the other mask figures that had not been stunned or killed following shortly thereafter.

Harry was still staring at the spot his twin had vacated in stunned silence, not even seemingly aware that the exceedingly short battle had actually finished.

Severus was just as stunned but quickly shook himself out of it. 'Get all the students back on the train and go.' He said. 'We need to get them to London before the Dark Lord finds out that wasn't Harry.'

Shacklebolt went to question him but Moody grabbed his arm. 'Do as he says.' He growled, herding those students near him back towards the train as Tonks ran around placing Ministry holding cell Portkeys on all of the dead or stunned Death Eaters and activating them.

‘We’ll apparate directly back to Hogsmeade.’ Severus said at the Auror’s unasked question and minutes later the train was underway once more leaving just Hermione, Severus and the four Weasleys still looking at Harry in trepidation.

Harry of course still hadn’t moved as was still staring at the empty ground. The thestral stallion landed nearby and walked slowly up to Harry, nuzzling his arm and wuffling softly. Eventually the Boy-Who-Lived raised his eyes. ‘Who?’ he whispered.

Snape glanced at those around them causing Harry to do the same.

‘No.’ his eyes were stricken with guilt. ‘Why? Why would you do that?’

Harry glanced down at the empty patch of earth once more before leaping on the stallion’s back. Before they could leave the ground however Harry was downed with two stunning spells he just wasn’t in any frame of mind to be aware of.

The stallion seemed to glare at the lot of them as Harry slid unconscious from its back.

‘It’s for his own good.’ Hermione said softly, tentatively stoking the stallion’s neck.

The thestral nickered, reaching out and nudging Harry’s face, who was now held firmly in Severus’ arms, before spinning on his haunches and launching himself into the sky.

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The trip back to Hogsmeade and up to the castle was made in complete silence none willing to speak until within the safety of the potions master’s rooms, Harry’s wandless silencing and anti eavesdropping charms still in place.

Severus set Harry back down on the sofa and stood back as the others arrayed themselves around the room, Bill and Charlie both leaning back against the door and the twins by the fireplace. They

wouldn't stop Harry if he really wanted to leave but hopefully they could stop him long enough for one of the others to stun him.

Hermione sat down on the edge of the sofa beside him and gently enervated him. 'Harry?' she whispered.

The Boy-Who-Lived blinked several times looking at those around him before he paled, his eyes fixed on the potions master. 'How could you?' he croaked. 'How could you let him do that?'

'We had to have someone pretending to be you or people would have asked questions and your form may have come out.' Severus insisted.

'No it wouldn't.' Harry yelled, sitting up and pushing past Hermione to stand. 'I had it all planned. You've killed him. As soon as Tom sees him he will know it isn't me.'

Severus stared at him. 'You knew.' He whispered incredulously. 'You knew what would happen.'

Harry lost it. 'OF COURSE I BLOODY KNEW.' He bellowed. 'I HAD IT ALL PLANNED. I KNEW THEY WERE COMING FOR ME AND ME ALONE. THEY WERE TO TAKE ME TO TOM. NO ONE ELSE WAS TO BE INVOLVED. AS SOON AS THE POLYJUICE WEARS OFF TOM WILL KNOW ITS DRACO AND KILL HIM. WHY THE HELL COULDN'T YOU HAVE JUST DONE WHAT YOU SAID YOU WOULD. NO ONE ELSE WOULD HAVE BEEN IN DANGER.'

'Because you aren't ready to fight him.' Severus snapped. 'You can't do it on your own.'

'I can and I will. I've been alone all my life. I don't need any of you. I can do this.'

'You aren't doing this by yourself.' Hermione burst out. The Weasleys were watching the anger build within Harry with no small amount of apprehension.

'Yes, I am.'

'You said you would let us help.' Hermione tried again.

The green eyes were like ice. 'I lied.' He said coldly. 'No one, no one, will die in my place again.' The boldness of the statement stunned Severus and Hermione into silence once more. It seemed the guilt Harry had been feeling hadn't waned in the slightest in spite of what he said. Harry turned to the two red heads by the door.

'Bill, Charlie, I love you like brothers but I will not hesitate to remove you from the doorway if you do not do it yourselves.' He said ominously. Fred and George raised their wands and sent stunners racing towards his back. Harry heard them coming and both were sent whizzing off course and into the wall with a wave of his hand.

'Don't.' he hissed, eyeing the twins before turning back. 'I will be leaving this room, one way or another. You can try and stop me but it is at your peril.'

'You would hurt them to get out of here?' Severus questioned.

Harry glanced at each of them slowly. 'Draco will not die by Riddle's hand. I refuse to allow it.' The unspoken words said much more than the spoken ones did and Bill and Charlie glanced at Severus in question.

'You can't go alone.' The potions master said quietly.

Harry turned once more and caught the man's eyes with his own and Severus' mind was cast back almost five years to the powerful seventeen year old he was just before he went to Azkaban. 'You cannot stop me Severus.' He whispered. 'This is not only my destiny, but my right. Do not try to stop what the Fates have decreed must happen.'

'Harry, please.' Hermione begged him to listen.

Severus' eyes never left Harry's. 'I want to go. Leave them but take me. You will need someone for a distraction if nothing else.'

'No.'

'Harry.'

‘No. I will have no one else’s blood on my hands, nor their life on my conscience. You will all stay here and I will return with Draco.’ Harry spun on his heel and stalked to the door where Bill and Charlie stood defiantly.

‘Let him go.’ Severus whispered finally. ‘Just let him go.’

‘Severus?’ Hermione gasped but Bill and Charlie, at Snape’s words and the glint in Harry’s eye just obediently moved aside. Harry gave them a small nod before swinging open the door.

‘Ah, Harry, my boy, I was just wondering.’

‘Move.’ Harry practically spat, pushing roughly past the headmaster and into the corridor heading up out of the dungeons and the castle proper.

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For over an hour he flew, the thestral stallion and his herd following closely behind. The stallion insisted on accompanying him in his search for the Dark Lord and Harry knew the magical creature would certainly be of help and so had agreed.

And he had been, just over two hours later they touched down in the grave yard Harry had been transported to back in his forth year. Wizards couldn’t have found the unplottable location but the true Thestrals had no problem seeking out an area so ripe with dark magic.

He stayed in his Animagus form as he looked up towards the manor he knew contained both his greatest foe and what had turned out to be one of his greatest friends. By the time night fell one of the two would be dead. Harry vowed that it wouldn’t be his friend. He had a duty to destroy Lord Voldemort and that he would do.

Wickering softly the thestral stallion nodded and Harry quickly changed back, conjuring a quill and parchment, scribbling a short note and placing a charm which would allow his words to appear on

the paper even in his Animagus form before he placed it in the stallion's mouth and changed back.

He whickered softly to the stallion who bobbed his head in reply before the two trotted swiftly towards the manor house. Harry felt more than heard the rest of the thestral herd following them and as they negotiated the steps to the entrance he imagined they must have looked quite a sight.

Harry's step almost faltered as they heard the screams that could only have come from Draco. The stallion sensing his distress broke into a canter and they fairly flew through the halls, following the screams until bursting into a huge chamber that was filled with Death Eaters.

'I'll ask you one more time.' Riddle hissed at Draco who was bruised and bloody on the ground before him. 'Where is Potter?'

The stallion gave a shrill cry plunging through the ranks of Death Eaters causing them to scatter once again.

Harry quickly followed him and the two Thestrals came to an abrupt stop either side of Draco who was curled tightly in on himself and moaning softly.

'What is this?' Riddle hissed glancing around the room before his eyes rested on the two Thestrals. 'Who sent you?'

The stallion stepped forward, dropping the note at Riddle's feet. The Dark Lord picked it up and scanned it. 'Potter.' He hissed in Parseltongue.

Harry concentrated hard causing more words to appear on the parchment.

'Let Draco go and you can have me instead. Tell him to get on one of the Thestrals and let him go and I will stay. It was what you wanted in the first place.'

Riddle looked up and he glanced around the room. 'Potter's here.' He hissed and the Death Eaters shifted in anticipation. 'Search the

manor, now.' The Death Eaters rushed from the room leaving just the Dark Lord and the two Thestrals, the rest of the herd shifting almost silently in the corner.

With a soft pop Harry changed back, quickly using his finger and cutting his hand, letting the blood well in his palm before flinging it at the doorway and murmuring the locking charm straight after. The blood magic would make it impossible for anyone to open the door other than himself.

'You're a thestral?' Riddle hissed incredulously.

'Yes.' Harry said quietly. 'Irony really.'

'But Thestrals...' Riddle actually trailed off.

'Yes.' Harry smiled wanly. 'Are considered a bad omen. So I've been told. But rather apt really when merely being in my presence does seem to get one killed.' All the while he had said this he had hauled Draco to his feet and practically thrown him bodily onto the thestral stallion placing a wandless sticking charm on him and nodding as the herd stepped forward surrounding the stallion and protecting Draco before crossing the eight paces to where the Dark Lord stood.

'Harry?' Draco gasped.

Harry pointed at the window and it flew open. The stallion nodded and with Draco protesting loudly cantered across the room before tucking its forelegs tightly against its chest and launching itself out the open window. Once Draco was safely outside Harry stepped up the last two steps until he was almost nose to nose with the Dark Lord.

'Potter, what the hell do you think you're doing.' Riddle hissed with what Harry thought was almost nervousness. Harry pulled out his wand and Riddle moved to step back but Harry pushed the wand into Riddle's spare hand and grasped the Dark Lord's upper arms firmly.

'Potter, get away from me.'

Harry's fingers tightened on the sinewy arms as he closed his eyes. 'Triathus, realius, pugustus, covertius.' He intoned softly, concentrating hard on pushing his magic through his hands. Riddle didn't know what to think but when Harry's hands began to glow a soft white he began to panic. He raised his hands trying to get the two wands to point towards Harry's back.

'Avada Kedavra.' He hissed and green light shot from the two wands straight at Harry's back.

What happened next shocked the Dark Lord. The green light of the killing curse hit Harry but was immediately encased in white that stretched back until it was touching the two wand tips before traveling up the two wands. Once it reached Riddle's hands the Dark Lord screamed and Harry concentrated even harder, pushing against the dark magic that tried to expel him from Riddle's body. Light magic fought dark and within minutes both Harry and Riddle were dripping with sweat from the effort.

Suddenly Harry felt a peace he'd felt only once before many years ago in the Chamber of Secrets as Fawkes flew through the window to land on his shoulder and with one final push Harry cast Riddle's dark magic from the snake like figure in his arms. Riddle screamed again, a heart wrenching sound that reverberated around the room and then his body shrank to nothingness leaving his robes to drop to the floor in a heap.

Harry, breathing heavily, stepped back, ignoring the pounding of the Death Eaters, who had heard their master scream, and surveyed the bundle of black robes lying innocently in front of him.

'Thanks Fawkes.' He whispered, reaching up to pet the phoenix. Fawkes trilled softly to him and what Harry assumed to be the oldest mare in the thestral herd came up and nudged his arm.

'Yes, let's go.'

Suddenly Fawkes trilled again and Harry glanced down at the pile of robes on the floor to see that it was moving.

Chapter 8 - Choices

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'Oh no.' Harry gasped, stepping away from the moving pile. He didn't think he could do it again. Without Fawkes' help he wouldn't have been able to do it the first time.

The bundle moved again and emitted a soft whimpering sound and Fawkes trilled once more encouraging Harry to look closer. With a deep breath he leant down and parted the thick fabric before stumbling back in shock, landing on his backside several feet from what he could now see was a child. An infant no older than several weeks. It lay crying pitifully as Harry just continued staring at it.

Fawkes trilled again and Harry felt the urge to pick up the child. He slipped off his own cloak and crawled forward, laying it beside the infant and carefully lifting and placing the child on it before wrapping it tightly and picking it up. The infant stopped crying and its blue eyes stared up at Harry causing something to almost clench within his chest.

'How?' Harry breathed. His eyes were riveted to the infant for some time before the mare nudged him again and Harry looked up. He could still hear the Death Eaters trying desperately to open the door and knew he had to get out of there. As if sensing his dilemma the mare knelt down and Harry stood and awkwardly clambered onto the Thestral placing a sticking charm on himself and the infant as the mare cantered across the room and flew out the window just as the stallion had done what Harry realised was almost an hour before; Fawkes and the rest of the herd following quickly.

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They landed in the forbidden forest and Fawkes disappeared. Harry felt a sense of loss he knew would take several hours to go away but without thinking on it further he hurried up towards the castle. Slinking through the now empty halls was easy and Harry quickly made his way back to the potions master's rooms where he knew everyone should still be waiting. He hoped Draco had made it back alright.

Whispering the password and cradling the now sleeping infant tightly to his chest he stepped into the room to see, Draco installed on the sofa but looking quite pleased with himself as Hermione doted on him as the Weasleys looked on in amusement and Severus paced in agitation by the fireplace.

'Hey.' He said softly and all seven heads looked in his direction.

'Harry.' Hermione shrieked and flew across the room. Harry released one arm to hug her to him tightly. 'I so glad you're alright.' She whispered and Harry pulled away slightly and kissed her.

'I told you I would be back.' He said simply.

‘Yes but when you made Draco leave we weren’t sure what was happening.’

Harry glanced up and caught the Slytherin’s eyes. ‘Are you alright?’ he asked in concern.

Draco nodded, giving him a smug grin. ‘Fine, between Sev and Hermione how could I not be?’

‘How long have you been back?’

‘Bout an hour and a half. That bloody stallion’s a maniac. Flew like he was possessed by something. Right into the castle no less and down the corridors before stopping and almost kicking Sev’s door down.’ Draco snorted.

‘Humph. Blasted animal.’ The potions master grumbled.

Harry smiled making a mental note to go and see the stallion later. ‘Good.’

‘Ah, Harry, what exactly is that?’ Bill asked hesitantly, pointing at the bundle in Harry’s arms that was now squirming.

Harry moved across the room and sat on the end of the sofa at Draco’s feet as the other came and crowded around him. He lowered the bundle and gently pulled the robe away from the infant’s face.

‘Bloody hell.’ Fred swore.

‘That’s a baby.’ George added.

‘Where did you get that?’ This was from Charlie.

‘Thank you for stating the obvious Messer’s Weasley. I think the more prudent question is who’s is it?’

Harry looked up and caught the suspicious glint in the beetle black eyes. ‘It’s Tom.’ He whispered. ‘As far as I can gather.’

‘It’s You-Know-Who’s?’ Bill raised both eyebrows in surprise.

Harry shook his head. 'No, it's actually Tom. Well Tom and me, I think.'

'You had a baby with the Dark Lord.' Draco sounded awfully confused and that expression was mirrored on every face but one.

'You used the purging spell, didn't you?' Snape stated and Harry nodded.

'I didn't know how else to do it. I figured that he was just made of dark magic and if I purged him of it he would just die. I wouldn't have to use the killing curse.' He said sadly.

'Didn't seem to work all that well.' The black eyebrow raised skyward as if admonishing the Boy-Who-Lived.

'No.' Harry said softly, gently stroking the baby's cheek. 'There must have been just a bit of good still left in him. I think maybe he kept a bit of me in him when he possessed me back in fifth year and it's that bit that remained. Of course Fawkes may have had something to do with it.' He added with a sigh.

'Fawkes?' Hermione asked and Harry took a deep breath and launched into a tale of exactly what happened.

It didn't take that long and just as Harry was finishing a knock sounded on the door. Harry stiffened and pulled the infant closer to him as if to protect it as Severus crossed the room and opened the door.

'Ah Severus, I was just wondering if young Harry had returned?' The headmaster asked cheerfully.

Snape rolled his eyes but allowed the elderly wizard to enter.

'You can leave the riddles outside, Albus.' Harry said curtly. 'I know for a fact that Fawkes would have told you I've returned as well as exactly what happened.'

Albus looked a bit taken aback at Harry's words but plowed on anyway. 'May I see the child, Harry?' he asked crossing the room

towards him in anticipation. Harry all but leapt off the sofa and moved to the fireplace, cradling the infant to him tightly once again.

‘No, you may not.’ Harry growled the others in the room looking confused at Harry’s sudden protective stance.

‘Come now, Harry. There is no need for this.’

Harry shook his head. ‘No. I know how your mind works and you aren’t getting your hands on this child.’

Severus and Draco exchanged an uneasy glance.

‘Harry, that child is evil, it must be destroyed.’ Dumbledore’s voice was like ice, stunning all but the two. Hermione and the Weasleys in shock that the headmaster could be so callous.

‘No, it’s not, as I’m sure Fawkes told you. He’s probably the purest thing in the world right now. There isn’t a scrap of evil in him anywhere and I won’t let you use it as an excuse to kill him.’ Harry’s voice broke as he choked back a sob and Hermione stood and moved to stand beside him.

‘He’s evil Harry.’ Dumbledore was adamant. ‘And he will be destroyed.’

‘He’s just a baby.’ Harry cried. ‘Evil is made, not born. We have a chance to set things right. To make up for the childhood Tom had and give him what he should have had. You can’t deny him this. You can’t deny me this.’

Dumbledore leveled an almost calculating gaze at Harry, taking in Hermione at his side and the baby in his arms, the entire picture looking like a family portrait out of an album, the only thing marring it was the tears streaking down Harry’s face. Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak but Harry beat him to it.

‘He was never shown love, never shown how to love another. It’s what turned him dark. He has a chance to learn how wonderful love can be, please Albus,’ Harry sucked in a deep breath trying to compose himself before he went on. ‘Don’t give up on him, you’ve

done that before and look what happened. He's just a baby, like any other, that needs to be loved so that he can grow. Don't let his past blind you to what he is now. You're the one saying everybody deserves a second chance. Do you mean everyone but Tom? Give him a chance; I promise you, it will be the greatest gift he's ever received.' Harry was breathing heavily by the end of his plea and his green eyes were begging the older wizard to agree.

Dumbledore silent for several moments before his expression softened. 'I think the greatest gift Tom has ever received is you, Harry.' He said softly.

Harry sighed in relief, hugging both Hermione and the baby to him tightly. He had no idea of where the strong protective feelings for the infant came from but the thought of the boy being taken from him caused his heart to race and his head to pound. There was some connection between them, to be sure, all Harry knew was that he would watch over and guard the child with his very life.

'You don't think the child would be better with a family that has other children?' Severus questioned gently, unsure of reaction he would receive from Harry. Instead it was Hermione who spoke up.

'No. He needs one on one attention. And he needs someone who knows his history. He will stay with Harry and me.' she said firmly and Harry could have kissed her.

'Are you sure?' Albus' expression was slightly anxious.

'Absolutely.' Hermione nodded.

'Harry?' Severus said quietly and Harry's head shot up from where he had been staring down at the child in his arms.

'Yes?'

Severus took in the slightly stunned expression on Harry's face. 'Do you intend to raise the child as your own?'

Harry glanced down at the boy once more. 'I would allow no other.' He said softly.

‘Harry, are you sure? I mean he killed you’re parents.’ Charlie said hesitantly.

Harry shook his head. ‘No he didn’t. Voldemort killed my parents. This is Tom. Just Tom.’ He whispered.

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(Seventeen years later)

Harry stared out around Hogwarts grounds, the many parents of the graduating seventh years chatting with each other as the seventh years themselves got ready for their graduation ceremony.

There had been a lot of them that year. The destruction of Voldemort as was reported to the public almost eighteen years ago causing an influx of children in that generation. This year’s batch of seventh years had been the biggest influx of students Hogwarts had seen in many years and was only exceeded by the following year’s group of children.

Harry had naturally been accepted back into the fold after his defeat of the Dark Lord but had never really gotten close to any but the seven that had always believed in him. He had stayed at Hogwarts with Hermione and raised their son. Some said it wasn’t fitting work for a wizard who had defeated a threat such as Voldemort but Harry didn’t care. He ignored the barbs about house husbandry and found looking after Tom as probably the most rewarding experience of his life. The boy grew like a weed and was adored by most in the castle.

Dumbledore kept an annoyingly close eye on him for any signs of darkness but none surfaced. Harry and the headmaster had had a tremendous row that had echoed throughout the castle on whether to tell the boy of his past. Harry naturally had won and one evening when Tom was just eleven he had sat down with Hermione, Severus and Draco and explained to Tom exactly how he came to be, from beginning to end.

To say the boy who had been horrified had been an understatement. The thought of cursing anyone in his family, let alone trying to kill

them had been just too difficult to contemplate. In the end though, after several hours of talking about what had happened Tom had stood and moved to kneel in front of Harry before hugging him tightly.

‘Thanks, Dad.’ He whispered. ‘Thank you for believing in me.’

‘It wasn’t just me. Everyone believes in you, Tom.’ Harry gestured to the others around him. ‘They have all watched out for you over the years.’

‘I won’t disappoint you, I promise.’ The boy vowed solemnly and Harry smiled and hugged him tightly again.

And he hadn’t.

James Thomas Potter had grown into a handsome young man that was loved and respected by many. He was always calm and content despite only possessing an average magical talent but he had worked exceptionally hard during his final years at Hogwarts to earn a place at the Auror Academy.

‘Daddy.’ Came a shriek which was the only warning Harry got before he found himself almost bowled over by an exuberant ten year old. Harry let out a soft grunt before lifting the little girl in his arms.

‘I thought you were with Uncle Draco.’ Harry scolded.

‘I was but he was taking too long to get ready.’ Lily Potter grumbled, her vivid green eyes shining innocently. Harry snorted; he could imagine Draco still preening in front of the mirror. ‘Oh, there’s Tom.’ Lily squealed, wriggling out of her father’s arms to run across the grass to fling herself into her brother’s arms. Tom lifted her high in the air and swung her around, raucous giggling reaching Harry’s ears.

Tom absolutely doted on his little sister, to the point where Harry had had to have words with the teenager about spoiling her. Harry laughed as Tom tried to put Lily down but she held tightly onto his neck and wouldn’t let go. When the seventeen year old began tickling her mercilessly she clambered around his side until she was clinging tightly to his back, well out of reach and in the end Tom just sighed and turned back to his friends.

Harry jumped as Hermione slipped her arms around his waist. 'Hey.' She said softly.

Harry turned slightly and smiled down at her. 'Hey yourself.' The passing years had been kind to Hermione. Her always stressed expression had relaxed as had her bushy hair. She was the current Head of Gryffindor house and loved every minute of it. As McGonagall had gotten older she had relied more and more on the younger witch until she finally decided that retirement was calling. Dumbledore too would be leaving this year and Harry was to take his place.

There had been many sleepless nights and deep discussions before Harry had agreed. In the end it had been Tom who had persuaded him. His Slytherin adopted son had shown him just how much he could help other children just as he had helped Tom.

'You unbiased views can only hinder the growth of another Dark Lord.' He had said.

Harry had continued to argue vociferously against the appointment but eventually had conceded and when the students returned in September there would be a new Headmaster sitting in that ornately carved chair at the head table.

'I'm so proud of you.' Hermione whispered and Harry glanced down at her again.

'I didn't do anything.' He said softly.

Hermione glanced over at when Lily was still perched on Tom's back as the teenager had his arm around his Ravenclaw girlfriend as he conversed with his friends, who came from all four houses. Tom had naturally been in Slytherin once again, but had immediately grown close to children from all houses. Harry and Hermione had bets on where Lily would end up.

'Harry.'

Harry and Hermione both turned to see the Headmaster's twinkling blue eyes looking back at them. 'You've done well, my boy.' Dumbledore went on. 'Tom is a credit to you.'

Harry glanced over at his pseudo son. 'He's a credit to himself, Albus. He just needed someone to give him a chance.'

'And a choice.' Dumbledore added.

'Do you regret it? Do you wish you had killed him when he was just a baby?' Harry asked, unable to hide the edge to his voice.

Dumbledore followed his eyes and watched as Tom bent his head to place a kiss on his girlfriend's temple causing Lily to burst into a fit of giggles. 'No, but you can't blame an old man for being scared.'

'Is that what it was Albus? Were you scared?' Harry asked. 'Or did you just want to get back at the one wizard who had bested you.'

'He never bested me.' Dumbledore countered.

'No, he didn't.' Harry admitted. 'But I did. I did the one thing you could never have done, prophesized or not.'

Hermione sucked in a breath as Dumbledore's eyes dimmed. 'Can't you ever let go of the past, Harry? It doesn't do to dwell on it.'

Harry gently untangled Hermione's arms as his expression became distant. 'I'm not dwelling on it. I'm remembering it, remembering exactly what happened so that it can never happen again.' He finished before crossing the grass swiftly to where Severus was standing.

'Do you ever think he will forgive me?' Albus asked quietly.

Hermione shook her head. 'No, probably not, Albus, but take heart, it's not just you. Harry's trust is easily gained but once broken is almost impossible to repair. You had an incredible gift, all of you, and you threw it away without a thought.'

elderly wizard as he turned to face him. Harry didn't say anything, instead simply holding his hand out. It was the first time since Harry had been sent to Azkaban that he had willingly allowed one other than his close friends and family to even touch him and Dumbledore took it for what it was.

Forgiveness.

With tears in his eyes the old man raised his own hand and shook Harry's warmly, his tears reflected by many who witnessed the scene.

'Thank you.' Albus whispered. 'Thank you.'

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There you are. I did tell you I'd finish it. There wasn't much left but it all came at once so there you are.

I hope you all enjoyed it and I'm sorry it was such a long ride.

Kindest regards,

Mione.